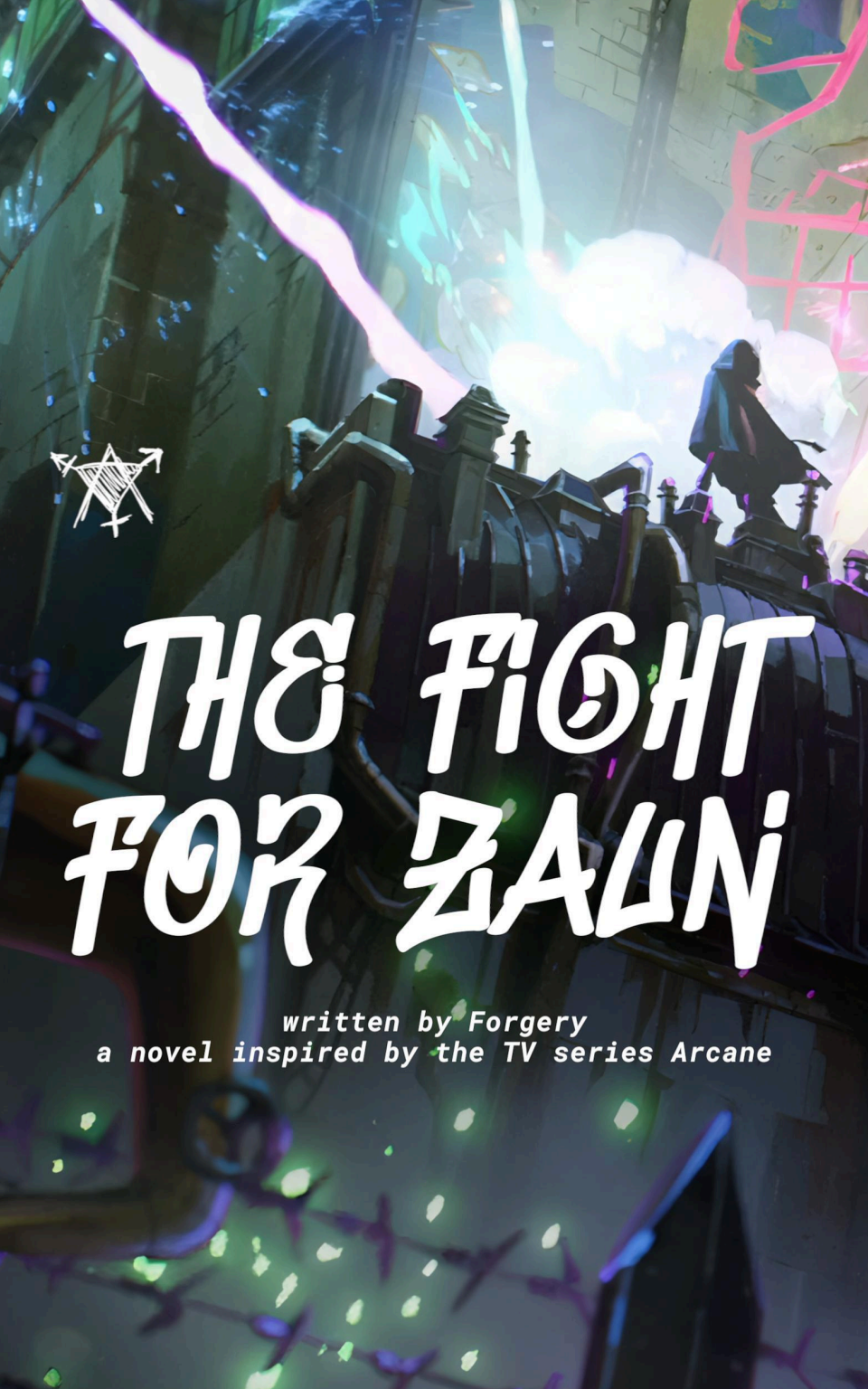
THE FIGHT FOR ZAUN
written by Forgery
a novel inspired by the TV series Arcane

FORGERY

The Fight for Zaun

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Blurb

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The Fight for Zaun

by aphrodisiatic_cat

> Jayce blinked, swaying into his saviour, unsteady.
>
> "Shit," she muttered. "Viktor, he's fucking heavy, can we come in?"
>
> Jayce looked up, and found a deep honey-gold gaze inspecting him closely, edged in black.
>
> After a few long moments, the tall man sighed and stepped aside. "You and your lost puppies, Vi. Fine, but if there are Enforcers following him, I'm giving you up in a heartbeat."
>
> "Uh huh," she said, her eye roll audible.
>
> "Where did you even find a broken Piltie?" Viktor

> swept passed them, slim skirt trailing on the floor.

After Jayce Talis blows up his own laboratory, the Council banishes him from Piltover. But he escapes, making his way to the Undercity to continue his quest to invent magic.

Luckily, he runs into just the right crew to help him with this dream - Vi, Jinx, Ekko, and Viktor.

Once they harness the power of Hextech, can they unite the people of Zaun, and win the fight for their sovereignty?

Summary

The Fight for Zaun — by aphrodisiatic_cat

- Rating: Mature
- Archive Warning: Graphic Depictions Of Violence
- Categories: F/M, M/M, F/F
- Fandom: Arcane: League of Legends (Cartoon 2021)
- Relationships: Jayce/Viktor (League of Legends), Ekko/Jinx (League of Legends), Jayce (League of Legends)/Mel Medarda, Mel Medarda/Sevika
- Characters: Jayce (League of Legends), Viktor (League of Legends), Vi (League of Legends), Ekko (League of Legends), Jinx (League of Legends), Sevika (Arcane: League of Legends), Silco (Arcane: League of Legends), Gert (Arcane: League of Legends), Isha (Arcane: League of Legends), Caitlyn (League of Legends), Mel Medarda, Original Characters, Ambessa Medarda, Salo (Arcane: League of Legends), Shoola (Arcane: League of Legends), Hoskel (Arcane: League of Legends)
- Additional Tags: Canon Divergence, Plotty, POV Alternating, watched them drop the ball on Piltover/zaun politics and said 'fine ill do it myself', Police Brutality, Gun Violence, a gang of filthy rebels look after each other, Shimmer Addiction (Arcane: League of Legends), Firelights (Arcane:

League of Legends), zaun becomes an anarchist haven ig, War, ACAB, Fluff and Angst, Found Family, Zaunite Viktor (League of Legends), Zaunite Jayce (League of Legends), Hurt/Comfort, Minor Character Death, Plot, Abusive Parents, Blood, Matricide, references of genocide, Murder, Minor Caitlyn/Vi (League of Legends), Minor Meljayvik, Zaun Revolution (League of Legends)

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I

Act I — Prelude

1

Jayce

Jayce could only stare down at his strange shadow, cast by the harsh light above. The shrewd, cold eyes of the Piltovian Council weighed on him. Guilt and fear sat heavy in his stomach. *My life's work. Gone.*

But he also knew he would never have an opportunity like this again.

"I don't know, my boy," Heimerdinger mused. The Yordle's immense eyebrows drooped as he peered above the edge of the table. "You destroyed your own lab with this…magic! Who knows what further experimentation could unleash? This power…it corrupts, we've seen it before."

"Surely, as scientists, we would harness this power for good?" Jayce pleaded. He focused on the stunning woman in gold. *Councillor Medarda*. Her piercing green eyes had not left him once, though she had yet to speak. *Maybe she'll see, she won't be as afraid of—*

"Those are wonderful intentions, Jayce," came Cassandra Kiramman's prim voice. "And I would sleep well at night if this magic stayed only in your hands, or the Council's. But not everyone would want to use such power for good. Can we really ensure the safety of Piltover if you pursue this?"

"But – but imagine!" he cried, his hands clenching around nothing. "We could really *fix* things, improve everyone's lives, raise up the undercity, and—"

"The *undercity?*" the thin blond man broke in. His nose crinkled faintly. "No, no, that's exactly the kind of thing that could go wrong. Who knows what those *people* would do with it? Overthrow us in an instant, no doubt! Raze our lovely city to the ground!"

Cassandra sighed, leaning back. "We do know that the power of magic, in the wrong hands, could make very powerful weapons. And I have no doubt who the undercity denizens would point it at first."

No, shit, no, it's all going wrong, they can't possibly be about to—

"I'm very sorry, Jayce," Heimerdinger said, ever the academic. "I believe Councillor Kiramman raises salient points."

"This is ridiculous," Jayce bit out. "If you'd just think about this properly—"

"I believe all of us should think about this properly," Councillor Medarda interjected coolly. "Yourself included, Mr Talis."

Anger rose in his chest – and boiled over.

"I've thought about this every moment of my life," he snapped. "And I'm not about to let some stuffy old council who've never touched a spanner in their lives tell me that I can't do something – something that's going to change all our lives for the better!"

Muttering filled the room. The councillors shifted in their seats, uneasy. Jayce slumped. *Shouldn't have said that.*

"Jayce," Heimerdinger said. "I'm very sorry. But the codes are clear. The consequence of foolish actions such as this calls for…banishment." He raised a small, furry hand. "All those in favour?"

Hands raised around the chamber, accompanied by a corresponding *thud* of a spotlight opening above them. Jayce's body twitched each time. The reality of the moment was beginning to sweep through him.

Banishment?

Where would he go? Be shipped off to Noxus, or Demarcia, or the backwaters of Ionia? Did Ionia even *have* water, let alone academies? There was nowhere but Piltover that he could complete his work.

I'll have to leave Mamá. He craned his head, but couldn't find her in the crowd.

The councillors sealed his fate with a vague indifference, though Cassandra had the grace to look at least a little guilty.

Only the elegant Medarda abstained. She did not seem offended at his outburst, her hazel eyes only curious, burning into him as the Enforcers lead him away to collect his things

* * *

"C'mon, Jayce Talis," grunted the over-sized Enforcer. He dragged a cart behind him, tottering with every possession Jayce could fit into it.

Jayce trudged along behind it in a daze, with another Enforcer behind him. He could see the docks ahead as the elegant Piltover buildings began to thin. *Just one block to —*

The docks. No one had bothered to pick a destination for him to *restart his entire life,* apparently, he was just being thrown onto the next ship out to who-cares-where. Somewhere to rot away in peace.

I'd rather die.

The thought hit him like a slap to the face. And he realised, yes. He would rather die.

Nerves curled in his belly, but anger burned it away in an instant.

I will not walk blindly into this ending.

Jayce glanced around surreptitiously. *There*. An alleyway coming up on the left, and he knew where it led.

Before Jayce had a chance to second-guess himself, he stumbled to a stop. He covered his face with his hand and let his wide shoulders slump. The Enforcer behind him sighed.

"Look, Talis, I'm sorry. What a load of typical Council bullshit, ey? But I'm sure you'll settle down somewhere. At least they didn't—"

With a burst of speed he didn't know he had, Jayce threw himself forward and ran for the gap in the buildings. The Enforcer yelled out, and the other dropped Jayce's belongings with a crash.

Jayce actually hit the wall, bounced off it, and dashed along the narrow lane.

What the hell am I doing? Banishment was one thing, but they'd lock him up for this, he'd never see the sun again, no more magic, not even exile, *gods* did he really think he could get away with this?

No time for that now.

He careened around another corner. Footsteps crashed behind him. He ran for his life, always turning east-ward where

he could.

The Enforcers were one turn behind him, then two. Their footsteps began to fade. Jayce's lungs heaved. He certainly wasn't used to running like this. But then, he wasn't exactly used to fleeing for his life.

He popped out in a quiet street, spinning wildly on the spot. *Should be right near —*

Yes, there it is. The old tailor's. He gave a shaky laugh, dashing towards it, then past. *One last corner.*

He stumbled to a stop as a hole opened up in the street, and Piltover's neat cobblestones dropped away.

The fissure yawned, deep as a canyon, where there should have been an intersection. Glowing green and purple lights lit up the haze of chem-fog far below. Something acrid tickled his nose. A narrow set of shaky metal ladders lead down into the Lanes.

This path to the undercity was an open secret among scholars at the Academy seeking more…well…unsanctioned supplies for their studies. Best used when wanting to avoid the shuttles and the attention of those staffing the bridge. Jayce had only actually taken this way once, much preferring those sturdier routes to Benzo's shop.

Jayce could feel the edge of the street with his toes. His stomach clenched. He looked back, over his shoulder.

The spires of the Academy peeked above the tall, gilded buildings. The high golden arches winked in the sun. *Everything I dreamed of.*

He looked down into the chasm below.

If I fall to my death down there...

Well, better than a living death in exile.

He scampered down the first ladder, going as fast as he dared.

* * *

It was the very last ladder, of course. It gave a loud groan as he put his weight on it, and then—

Snap.

He was falling.

With a sickening crunch, he landed. Jayce screamed as pain shot through his leg, ankle bent under him at a concerning angle. Something rattled in his pocket.

Shit, did they—

No. I'd be dead right now if they did.

He rolled over, The cold, gritty water of the street soaked instantly through his fine coat. Jayce pushed himself up to sit, and pressed fearfully into his calf. His fingertips moved a little lower, and as he pressed on his ankle—

Jayce bit off a cry at the stab of pain, bones shifting. *Shit.*

He almost pulled himself up, made himself look around, get his bearings. See if he could remember which direction Benzo's was in.

Then, with a sigh, he slumped back to the ground.

I'm a man on the run with a broken leg.

What a joke.

* * *

"I'll have what this guy's having."

Jayce drifted in and out of awareness as he lay curled up on the cold, undercity street. His body was starting to cramp. The

pain in his ankle gripped tighter.

He heard the person crouch beside him.

"Had a big night, have you?" They sighed. "And that's a nice coat you're getting all wet."

He turned his face away with a groan.

"Getting you home is gonna be a pain, isn't it, big guy," they muttered, then gave his arm a firm shake. "Come on. Up time."

With a flash of frustration, he shoved himself up and glared at the intruder.

"Fuck's sake, can't a man just give up in peace?"

The undercity punk had short pink hair and a scowl. There were plenty of cuts and scars carved into her face, giving away a lifetime of taking punches. She seemed a few years younger than Jayce, but there was a hard glint in her pale eyes.

"Fine, you want peace? I'll give it to you," she said with a scoff, pushing to stand.

Jayce tried to move his leg, and couldn't hold back a yell. *Maybe it'll fall off. Be just my luck.*

The punk twitched, and finally noticed the broken ladder beside him.

"What have you been up to, huh? You some topsider?"

Jayce tried to move again, grimacing. *It's her or nothing.*

"Wait, I – ah! – do you think you can – I would appreciate your help. I was trying to get to Benzo's shop," he grunted out.

She crossed her arms. "Benzo, huh? Friend of yours?"

He groaned in reply, managing to get his good leg underneath him. He tried to push himself up to stand, precarious—

"Idiot," she sighed, and grabbed him under his arm. "You're gonna stand up when I tell you, okay?"

He just nodded, bracing himself.

"Alright – up you go." She pulled with starling strength. He

yelled as he pushed up to balance on his good leg, leaning heavily on her.

"There you go, buddy." Her voice strained a little. "Now, the hopping is going to hurt like shit. But if you scream every time, we're gonna have company, and you're in no shape to back me up in a fight."

Jayce almost wanted to slump in a heap again at the thought. But he was coming to realise how lucky he was that his apparently kind-hearted stranger had been the one to come across him, helpless in the street.

"Fine."

"Good. I got a friend not far from here. Benzo's is a hike even without a broken foot. We're gonna hop now, okay?"

He didn't bother replying. Leaning heavily through her, he hopped. He managed to keep his scream contained in his throat.

"Doing good, buddy," she murmured, readying herself for his next leap.

Shaking from the pain, they made their way slowly along the street.

* * *

The punk kicked hard on the unassuming door, just another in a long line of houses on just another dark, narrow, undercity street.

Jayce was leaning heavily on her now. His muscles weakened as the pain throbbed through his whole body.

"Got company!" she yelled out.

They waited for a few long moments.

"Are they—" Jayce panted, desperation weighing him down further.

"Yeah, he's coming, give him a tick."

The door creaked open.

The man stood tall and thin. He had long hair curling to his collarbones, a rich brown with sharp white streaks near his shoulders, held back by a pair of welder's goggles. He wore a tight shirt cut off at the ribs, exposing several moles on his smooth belly, and some kind of elaborate chest brace. Slim metal cuffs wound around his upper limbs and accentuated his elegant beauty nicely. A long, deep red skirt draped over tight pants, with a slit up one thigh showed off an intricate leg brace. It was shaped in the curving metal style that Jayce had seen in the architecture of the Undercity before. It was good metalwork, although as Jayce looked more closely, he thought the part on the outer knee there could use adjusting…

Jayce blinked and swayed into his saviour, unsteady.

"Shit," she muttered. "Viktor, he's fucking heavy, can we come in?"

Jayce looked up. He found a deep honey–gold gaze inspecting him closely. The shrewd intelligence there missed no detail, making Jayce want to curl in on himself all over again.

After a few long moments, the tall stranger sighed and stepped aside. "You and your lost puppies, Vi. Fine, but if there are Enforcers following him, I'm giving you up in a heartbeat."

"Uh huh," she said. Her eye roll was audible as they staggered over the threshold.

"Where did you even find a broken Piltie?" Viktor swept passed them, slim skirt trailing on the floor.

They were in a workshop, cluttered with metal parts, tools, and blueprints on every surface. It felt homely, the mess of a

true working artist. Jayce breathed in the familiar smell of oil and chalk dust. *He's a scientist, and a good one by the looks of those braces.*

The stranger led them to the next room, a living area, with a small cramped kitchen. A large table filled the space, piled up with some dirty bowls and half-made contraptions. In the corner was a day bed of sorts, which Viktor gestured to. Jayce and his disgruntled saviour made their way towards it. He sat on the edge with a groan that came from the depths of his soul.

"Is that better?" the tall stranger asked. He pulled up a seat up opposite Jayce.

"Yes," was all he could say. The pain still spiked through him, making his head swim, half-delirious.

"Lie back," the stranger murmured. "Vi, what happened?"

Jayce all but collapsed back onto the cushions, shifting to bring his legs onto the bed with a cry.

She – Vi, apparently – gave a loud sigh. She headed to the kettle and started making tea, clearly knowing her way around.

"I'm just wandering home from the Last Drop and I see this guy just lying in the street. Thought he was passed out from too much whatever. I was gonna help him get home, but he was worse than I thought with that ankle. Figured you were closest."

"Hmm," said the stranger, heavy eyebrows drawn together. *Viktor,* he recalled. His firm fingers moved deftly over Jayce's leg. He pressed, halting at once at his ankle when Jayce hissed in pain. "Where?"

"Near the ladders, by Claggor's last place. Not many Pilties go that way. Oh, and he knows Benzo."

"Ah, that explains it. An Academy brat." He smirked. "I do love Ekko's stories of fleecing wide-eyed over-pennied so-called

scholars at the shop. In fact…" He cocked his head. "Just the other day, he had a good story, didn't he, Vi?"

"I still think we should've done it. Heisted that sucker," she muttered from the kitchen. "A haul of weird Academy crap like that would've kept Jinx busy for months."

"I'm glad you listened to me. You've got no idea what that equipment was. Those crystals, I've heard stories—"

He broke off as Jayce twitched under his hand. *He knows about the crystals?*

Viktor's eyes were far too shrewd for Jayce's liking.

"In fact, there's this one story I heard recently," he said slowly. "Of an odd explosion, from the laboratory of a gifted Academy student. I heard the boy was facing…exile."

Jayce held still as a rabbit.

Vi stopped her pottering in the kitchen, looking hard at Jayce. "Wait, really? You think this guy might be an exile, from the Academy?"

"Exiled from all of Piltover. And, well, just look at that jawline," Viktor said. His lips twitched. "That looks like the face of a self-important, reckless Piltie dabbling in technology that he barely understands, does it not?"

"I understood it just fine!" Jayce snapped. *I thought I'd set up the test safely, I had no idea those things could be so reactive upon impact!* Then he sighed, guilt twisting anew. He knew he was damn lucky no one was hurt.

Viktor sat back and crossed his arms smugly. "What is your name, then, Mister Academy brat? And what were you up to that got you tossed out of shiny Piltover into our Lanes?"

Jayce gave a long sigh. There seemed to be no point hiding things from the clever scientist.

"Jayce Talis. And I was…inventing magic."

"*Inventing* magic?"

"Yes."

"Can't be done."

Jayce lay back into the pillows. Bone-deep weariness swept through him.

"I'll explain it. Just…" He tried to find the words to unravel everything, but something welled up in his chest. He had no lab, no Academy, no home, no family or friends, barely the clothes on his back, on the run from Enforcers. And as grateful as he was to have landed with people who seemed overall decent…

I'm alone.

"…in the morning?" His voice cracked a little.

Vi came across from the kitchen, carrying three mugs precariously. Viktor took two, and held one out to him. Jayce's cold, wet hands soaked up the warmth gratefully.

"In the morning, then. You wouldn't get far if I turn you out. Ah, speaking of…" He stood and crossed the room, disappearing into the workshop. Jayce heard light clanking.

Vi dropped into another chair with a sigh. "You really better not bring Enforcers here, jawline."

Enforcers. Would they be on the trail? Would they deduce where he'd fled? How far would the Council go to stop him, to stop *magic,* from helping everyone?

Cowards. His anger flared again.

"What if I make it worth your while?" he said slowly.

Vi cocked her head. "And how would you do that?"

Jayce reached into the pocket of his jacket and pulled out a small tin. *Just smokes*, he'd told the Enforcers. *Guilty pleasure.*

Vi's eyes lit up with the blue glow of the crystals as he opened the containment device.

"Viktor," she called out. "I think the Piltie's growing on me."

"Is that so?" he replied. He appeared in the doorway with an armful of tools, metal, and leather straps. He stopped short at the sight of the crystals in Jayce's hand.

"Jayce." His rich voice almost caressed the word. "That was rather clever of you."

Jayce smiled as he snapped the case shut. "Well, if Piltover won't have me, why shouldn't the undercity?"

"Zaun could most certainly make use of…magic." Viktor's tone was still sceptical as he approached the bed. He dropped his things on the bed beside Jayce.

"Hextech," Jayce corrected him.

"*Hextech?* Mm." The corner of his mouth twitched. "Pretentious. I like it."

Jayce couldn't help a tired smile in return. "You're not wrong," he admitted.

Viktor picked up a simplified version of the leg brace he wore. He inspected it closely, then Jayce's foot. He began to unscrew a section. Jayce's ankle was in less pain, but there was still a cruel ache radiating from the bones. His stomach turned as he saw the way it lay on the bed, all wrong.

Jayce took a sip of his tea. It was bitter and strong, and he couldn't stop a grimace.

Viktor frowned at him. "You don't like our drink? This, this is our national beverage, beloved by Zaunites." He scoffed. "Of course you topsider would find it disgusting, our culture, our *legacy*, no less—"

"Oh, I don't – I'm sorry, I…"

Vi cut him off with a laugh. "National beverage? Closest thing to that would be pure fucking liquor. He's messing with you, jawline. I've never seen anyone do tea the way he does it, lets it sit on the stove and brew at all hours. Makes something

that can half-wake the dead. I actually watered yours down to improve the taste." She shrugged, drinking deep. "But it grows on you."

Viktor shot a glare at her. "You spoil all my fun."

Jayce chuckled, taking another sip. There was actually a richness to it that reminded him of his mother's favourite dishes—

He gripped the mug tight as grief washed over him.

"I guess I will have to get used to it. And your undercity tastes." He felt tears welling up for a moment.

Viktor's hand moved, landing on Jayce's knee. The deep golden eyes had softened.

"Rest, Jayce Talis. Think of that tomorrow. I'll have this ready, I'll show you how us cripples get around." He gave a twisted grin.

Jayce returned the best smile he could muster.

"Thank you," he murmured. He looked across at Vi, meeting her gaze. "Thank you," he said again. She just shrugged.

Then, his head resting back on the pillows, he sank into deep sleep.

2

Viktor

The topsider whimpered in his sleep as he tried to roll over, jarring his ankle. Viktor's fingers tightened sympathetically over the last few joints on the makeshift brace.

"Jeez, he doesn't look good." Jinx hovered over him, her lively face just a few inches from his.

"It's definitely the guy from Benzo's." Ekko looked over from the kitchen sink as he scrubbed the last of their breakfast from Viktor's pot. "You know, he might be kind of…pissed? I did, y'know…fleece him over a bunch of crystals that ruined his life?"

"You'll be fine, Ekko," said Vi, at the table between Jinx and Viktor. "He couldn't fight a kitten right now."

"Maybe he couldn't kick one," said Jinx. "But those arms are pretty big. How'd a soft topsider smarty-pants get like that, from lifting up their big nice books? I mean, Vik's so scrawny."

Viktor arced an eyebrow. "You are nothing but bones, Jinx."

"Yeah, that's why I like shooting stuff!" Jinx whirled away, perching on a chair. "This guy could really throw a punch"

"Could come in handy," Vi mused.

"Handy?" Ekko said with a snort. "What, you pick him for a Firelight? I'm not recruiting him."

Jinx gave a cackle. "Get him a zippy little board! Who're you gonna have him fight, Vi? Big, bad Silco? His Piltie friends? I bet he's all buddy-buddy with blue bellies, you think he'd fight them?"

"Least he's not buddy-buddy with Silco," Ekko muttered.

Jinx's eyes flashed pink. "Hey, Silco asks me to do something fun, I do it! Same for you. And you." She pointed a screwdriver at him, then at Vi. "Besides, at least he actually goes after the 'Forcers. When was the last time you and the bugs even left the Lanes?"

"Throwing paint all over Piltover just because Silco asked you to isn't as heroic as you think it is, Jinx," he shot back.

"Guys," Vi said with a sigh. "Shut up. We know."

"You shut up," Jinx grumbled, curling in on herself.

The only sound was Ekko's brush scratching in the sink.

"Vi, you should take him, train him up," he said finally. "See if he would actually punch an Enforcer."

She cocked her head. "I mean, it's not the worst idea. See what he's made of."

Jinx snorted. "He *did* blow up his own lab. Very…me of him. I can't take him though, I'm one of a kind!" She flashed Ekko a grin. Ekko rolled his eyes, but smiled back.

"All of you think with your fists," Viktor said softly. He'd heard enough. He leaned forward and looked hard at Jinx, then Ekko. "That is all of our problems, and all of your solutions. I wish you would spend more time here and help with my projects. I

think my new air scrubbers can almost eradicate carcinogenic products."

Jinx scowled at him and picked up some loose parts on the table, beginning to slot them together.

"Quick fix," she muttered. Ekko nodded.

"She's right," said Vi. "Air's only gonna get so much clearer while the Pilties look down on us from those big pretty buildings. Enforcers are still gonna shove us down."

"We have no choice but to think with our fists," Ekko said, staring sadly into his pot. "That's all they do."

"I know. I know." Viktor ran a finger along the brace on the table. "We all play our part."

He looked up and Vi met his gaze, giving a short nod. Ekko nodded too. Jinx curled up on the chair, just picking at her device.

"I mean, Viktor," Vi said thoughtfully. "If the big guy got tossed down here for doing whacked out experiments, maybe you take him. Get yourself a real lab-mate."

Viktor looked closely at the man on his daybed. He saw the heavy brows twitch. He was finding that the Piltie was not very good at hiding things, which he rather appreciated. Viktor smiled to himself.

"I'm not sure if he'll be up to my standards," he said drily, and almost laughed as he saw the man twitch again.

"Even if he gives us his crazy explosive crystals, who knows what we'd do with them," Vi said. "We're a goddamn mess down here! Can't agree on who to fight, how to fight, if to fight. Vander was nuts to think we could just, what, *make* a goddamn nation?"

"We're growin' one leaf at a time, Vi," Ekko said quietly. "It's not just on you."

"It is not," Viktor added. Jinx just grunted, curling up tighter, eyes flicking to Vi then away.

Vi slumped in the chair, rolling her eyes at them. But Viktor saw her shoulders unwind just a little.

"Well," said Ekko. "The topsider landed in the Lanes *yesterday*. Even if he offered the crazy crystal things, he might've been out of his mind. He probably couldn't care less about us chem-rats."

"Then let's hope he's open to listening," Viktor said deliberately. The brows twitched again. "Shall we show him the tree today, Ekko? Seems as good a method as any to test him out."

Ekko looked worried. "You sure?"

"He can't exactly go to the Enforcers about it," Viktor raised his eyebrows. Ekko snorted.

"Think he's up for it?" said Vi.

Viktor leaned forward. "Well, Jayce Talis?" he called.

Jayce lay still for a moment, then his eyes blinked open. He looked sheepish as his gaze met Viktor's.

"Uh," he said, then cleared his throat. "Not sure."

Vi and Ekko turned and glared at him. "Sneaky jawline," Jinx just said with a cackle.

"Pass the man a bowl of breakfast, Jinx?" Viktor said.

Jayce pushed himself slowly upright, hissing with pain. The ankle was now swollen and purple. He took the offered breakfast with a pained smile.

He groaned at the first few mouthfuls. "Fank you," he mumbled, meeting Viktor eye's gratefully.

As the man ate, Ekko wandered across to the table, folded tea towel over his shoulder from drying. He stood beside Jinx, who was half-crouched on her chair.

She gave the device in her hands a last twist, then looked up at him with a wide grin.

"Whatcha got there?" he asked softly.

"You!" she said, offering it up.

Ekko took it gingerly. He gave one part a twist, and the contraption glowed green. Small wings fluttered, and the metal firelight lifted off his palm a few inches. Its small legs were anchored to a hoverboard, a miniature of the one leaning against Viktor's wall. It swayed back and forth in the air for a few moments before running out of power and falling back into Ekko's palm. The head of the little bug had a smudge of paint on it in the shape of an hourglass.

He gave Jinx an exasperated look. "Me, huh?"

"It's zippy and everything!" she said with a bounce. "Give me a tick and I can make it fly properly."

"Thank you," he said softly. "It's less messy than usua-"

The device gave a pop, and the bug's end splurted out a puff of lime-green powder. It splattered all over Ekko's hand and half his shirt. Some of it got over Vi, who brushed it off with a roll of her eyes.

Jinx giggled as Ekko wiped his hand on her arm with a smile, smearing it green.

"Can I see that?" Jayce asked, wiping his mouth. He leaned over to deposit the empty bowl on the table, having wolfed it down.

Ekko and Jinx whipped around to look at him. They looked at each other, communicated silently.

Jinx nodded slightly. Ekko passed the firelight device to Jinx, who held it out to Jayce. He took it gently, turning it over in surprisingly dexterous fingers.

"Wow," he breathed. "That took you, what, a few hours?"

"Yeah. I'm crazy!" she said with a wide grin. Vi rolled her eyes. Ekko just smiled.

"You'll find that Zaun has minds just as bright as those in your Academy," Vikor said pointedly to the topsider.

Jayce's bright eyes met his as he nodded, thoughtful.

Viktor stood. He brought the brace and a long bandage with him as he approached the bed. He took a seat cautiously beside Jayce's leg.

"I'm going to get this wrapped up," he said. "Then we have something to show you, before you decide what to do with your crystals."

Jayce sighed. "Alright. This is going to hurt, isn't it?"

"You bet it will, buster," Jinx cackled.

Jayce managed the ordeal rather admirably, with only a few cut-off yelps. Viktor was as gentle and swift as he could manage, realigning the foot as best he could before wrapping it in the bandage. He slid the brace on, wincing with Jayce as he positioned it over the joint and tightening the straps. Jayce watched him closely as he worked, analysing every component of the brace.

"You'll wear this at almost all times for a few weeks," said Viktor.

He nodded obediently. "Will I see a doctor?"

Vi snorted. "For just a broken ankle? Doc won't have the time."

"Well, there are…shortcuts," said Viktor. He watched Ekko carefully.

Ekko glared at him immediately. "Topsider will be fine without Shimmer. His bones probably heal faster and everything."

Jinx rolled her eyes. "Shimmer's not evil, Ekko. I'd be dead without it." Her pink eyes flashed in the light.

Vi and Ekko both frowned at that. Ekko's hands curled into fists. "You don't see what it does to people—"

"It was just an offer," Viktor cut in quietly. Ekko and Jinx could argue for hours about this. Often did, coming over to tinker with his things, Jinx showing him some new bomb she'd designed. He did understand the need for her violence, he really did. But every time he tried to talk it through with her, she rebuffed him, poking fun at his little air filters. They lived in an uneasy peace about it. Well, all of Zaun did, really. None of them could agree on what to do.

But maybe that wasn't a bad thing. He knew his filters mattered as much as Zaunite firepower did.

He thought again of the blue glow of the crystals, and wondered. What was going to happen if that firepower became far more…effective?

Right now, that depended on the sad-looking topsider before him.

"Ekko, fetch the crutches in the corner?" said Viktor. "Let's see how far you get today…jawline."

Jayce rolled his eyes as Jinx and Vi laughed.

3

Jayce

The board wobbled a little beneath Jayce as he drifted along. He sat on it with both legs hanging off one side, feet dangling a few inches from the Undercity street. He flexed his foot a little in his new brace. It didn't budge, although a stab of pain shot up his leg. It settled at once back into just a dull ache. He'd hopped around the lab on some of Viktor's old crutches just fine, but the walk to this tree was apparently pretty far, so Ekko had let him ride the hoverboard. Jayce assumed that 'the tree' was a clever euphemism for something. A bar? Some kind of machine, perhaps?

While graceful trees lined most of Piltover's streets, there were no plants to be seen in the Undercity. The buildings rose high and narrow around them, and neon lights flickered every few feet. Although it was the middle of the day, the Lanes lay in perpetual dusk. They were too deep in the fissures, with too much smog in the air. His stomach dropped as he realised that

this was as bright as it got down here.

This is as much sun as I'm ever gonna see again.

He gritted his teeth. *No point wallowing,* he thought to himself. *You're here, and you're alive. You have the crystals. And you've landed among a group of bickering criminals who have fed you, cared for you...and might even be much better inventors than you.*

Viktor walked beside Jayce. He dressed now in a long, navy dress, the heavier fabric better suited to the chilly Lanes. It fitted snugly around his chest, accentuating the smooth, graceful lines of his waist, before flaring to the ground. It, too, had a slit up to the hip. He was fairly sure Viktor had added it himself, as it allowed the brace to slide perfectly out into view with every step. Jayce watched in fascination. This brace was a more robust version of the other he wore at home, clearly designed for using on the the uneven streets. It gave off little puffs, helping propel the man forwards as he walked. *Pneumatic, perhaps?*

Jayce shifted his weight on Ekko's hoverboard, to see how it would respond. He smiled as he felt the thrum beneath him change as the board smoothly re-calibrated. Marvellous.

Jinx rode on Ekko's back as they wandered along the other side of the street. Her long blue braids swung around his feet, and she whispered something in his ear that made him smile. The little firelight device fluttered around their heads, glowing the same green as the board.

What would minds like these make of Hextech?

Jayce was realising that his dreams of magic probably would have withered at the Academy anyway. Already, he was dismissed by his professors and fellow students whenever he got carried away, talking excitedly about his experiments. And what did Piltover do, the moment he took it too far? Exiled him. Afraid at the mere thought of Hextech in the hands of the

Undercity.

And maybe they should have been.

He was very lucky that this crew had scooped him up.

Vi walked slowly beside the board, carrying his crutches. A chill ran through him, and he pulled the overlarge brown coat tighter around him. He wasn't used to clothes being too big for him.

"Thank you for the change of clothes. You said this coat was from someone called…Vander?" he asked her.

Her eyes became steely. "Yes."

"Your…?"

"Father," she said. "Our father, me and Jinx. Or, he was. Gone now."

"I'm sorry," he said quietly.

Vi shrugged. "That's the Lanes. We've all lost someone. To Enforcers, or Silco, or the mines, or—" she shot a look at Viktor—"the sickness."

"I think my leg looks better this way anyway," Viktor flipped his hair dramatically at her, and Vi snorted. Jayce gripped the edge of board, watching Viktor's brace, and felt his heart twist in his chest.

"Which took Vander?" Jayce asked.

"Well…" She looked across the street at the other two. Jinx was tickling Ekko's cheek with the end of her braid. A sad look fell over Vi's face.

"There was an accident. It wasn't her fault. Not really. She was trying to help." Vi shoved her hands deeper into her jacket pockets. "We fought. We— well, I was young, and an idiot. It was easy to blame her. Then I got scooped up by Enforcers for some bullshit I had nothing to do with, and thrown into Stillwater. Only got out a few months ago."

"How many years were you…" Jayce trailed off at the look in her eye.

"Not something I like to linger on, jawline."

"Right." He fished around for something else to say. "And now you're all rebels, or something? For…what did you call it, Zaun?"

"Well, this place needed some kind of name," she said defensively. "We're not just *under your city*, you know."

Huh. "I never thought of that."

"Why would you?" murmured Viktor, not unkindly. Jayce met his eyes for a moment. They flashed in the light of a lurid green sign.

Jayce didn't quite know what to make of the enigmatic scientist. He poked and prodded and called him *jawline*. But Jayce remembered the tenderness with which he'd passed him that tea, and told him to rest. *And he's interested in Hextech.*

The three of them turned a corner into the next street.

"And what do you all want to—"

"Wait," Vi said sharply. She stopped in her tracks. Viktor placed a hand on the board to halt it.

Jayce squinted. He could see a few people further down the street, but couldn't make out what was happening.

Vi turned quickly back to Ekko and Jinx.

"Blueys," she said sharply. "Go. See you there."

Jinx hopped down from Ekko's back immediately, and Jayce finally noticed what Vi had seen in a heartbeat.

Blue and gold uniforms.

"Up you get, Jayce," Viktor said. Vi stepped towards him and handed him the crutches, eyes never leaving the Enforcers.

"I— you don't think—"

"C'mon buddy, let's go," she said, tone brusque, muscles tense.

He grabbed the crutches and pushed himself up. Ekko reached for the board and leapt onto it deftly, then held out a hand to Jinx.

"Can't we have a little bit of fun?" she said with a whine, jumping up onto the board behind him and wrapping her arms around him. "I've got lots of goodies with me! Could put a few blue stains on the walls, liven up the place!"

"Let's go with stealth today, Jinx," Vi said shortly. Ekko pressed one of his hands to hers over his chest, interweaving their fingers.

She pouted at her sister. "Fine. See ya soon, jawline." With just a shift of Ekko's weight, they zoomed down a nearby alley with a hum and a puff of green smoke.

Jayce's mind whirred. Based on what he'd seen of the blue-haired girl, he could piece together what she meant by *a bit of fun*. His stomach lurched. They'd joked about explosives and punching blue-bellies. But these people would *kill* Enforcers?

Viktor turned to Jayce and reached into his leather bag. He pulled out a long, grey shawl.

"You'll wear this," he said, holding up the shawl. Though he seemed calm, Jayce could see the tension around his eyes.

Jayce nodded. Viktor stepped closer, draping it over his head, around his neck, and over his mouth. Jayce caught a hint of his scent before the cloth covered his nose. Viktor smelt like cloves, gear oil, and his bitter tea. But it was comforting.

"They're coming," Vi muttered. She glanced over. "Good call."

"Best to cover his face, just in case they're looking. Besides, he's not a very good liar," Viktor said. His eyebrows twitched. "Jayce, give me your best cough."

Jayce frowned, confused. His heart beginning to pound in his chest. He coughed a little into the shawl.

"Let's get more of a rattle up, buddy," Vi said. She glanced down the street. "C'mon, we gotta start walking, they're about to notice us."

Viktor looked deep into his eyes. "You can do this," he murmured.

"Are they looking for me?" Jayce's hands trembled.

Viktor sighed. "Most likely," he said. "Say nothing. You're sick, almost delirious. Don't overdo it."

"Wha—"

"Let's *go*," Vi hissed. Jayce adjusted himself on the crutches, taking an awkward step forwards. Viktor stayed with him. He took a few more steps, getting into a rhythm.

Two Enforcers were approaching. They'd split off from the group further up the street. The glint of the uniform's gold inlay shined in the murky air. Among the dark clothes of the undercity folk, that shine stood out to him. Jarring.

They had their weapons out, and gas masks completely covered their faces.

They had their weapons out.

And, Jayce realised, he was from the Undercity now.

"Slower," Vi hissed. "You're half dying."

Jayce slowed. His trembling probably helped with the air of frailty.

The Enforcers' footsteps echoed as they came closer. Their heads tilted as they scanned over the three of them. Viktor drifted a little closer to Jayce. Vi positioned herself firmly between them and the Enforcers, shoulders squared.

"Stop there, sump-rats," said the taller one, shifting their grip on their gun.

Vi took her hands slowly out of her jacket pockets, and Jayce saw that Viktor's hands were carefully within view as well.

"How can we help, Officer?" she said mildly.

The two stepped closer, crowding them a little. Jayce found the three of them were backed up against the alley wall.

"Where are you heading today, you little chem-stain?" Jayce twitched at the harsh word.

"Just home," said Vi, voice perfectly neutral.

The other Enforcer moved closer to Viktor, forcing him to step back. He looked over Viktor slowly, at his long tousled hair, smudged eyes, his elegant dress, the brace peeking out.

"This one looks on the way to the brothel. Want to start work early tonight, sweetheart? I bet I smell better than your usual chem-shit clients." He snickered.

Viktor said nothing, head held high. His eyes were hard.

Too hard.

"Little whore," the Enforcer muttered. Jayce saw his stance shift. *Wait, is he—*

The Enforcer lifted his gun, and swung the butt of the weapon. It hit Viktor's knee with a loud crunch and a hiss of steam. Viktor went down, kneeling before the Enforcer. Jayce yelped and swayed from the shock. Vi gave a jerk, but stood still.

The gas mask still covered the Enforcer's face. He couldn't see his eyes, his smile, any expression at all. Just those flat golden discs.

Viktor's head was lowered, hair falling around his face. After a moment, he looked up again. He met the Enforcer's gaze. Deep, amber rage burned there. But he stayed kneeling.

The other Enforcer looked at Jayce upon his yelp. They looked down at his brace. "Aw, look, they're matching," they said. Their grip shifted on their weapon.

Fear gripped Jayce's stomach, mind racing. He sucked in a breath.

And gave the most disgusting, rattling cough he could muster.

"Oh, Uncle," Vi said, stepping quickly over to him. She gripped him under the elbow. "I'm sorry, we shouldn't've gone out."

Jayce sucked in a breath, and coughed again, deep and hacking. He shivered and swayed. Vi's hand squeezed his elbow, and he thought he saw an approving smile flicker across her face.

The Enforcer scoffed. "They're just chem-rats," they said to the other. "The boy must have run somewhere else. He's likely still hiding in Piltover."

The other Enforcer looked down at Viktor, gripping the weapon tight. *Look away*, Jayce pleaded in his head.

But Viktor's proud eyes did not waver.

The Enforcer shook his head. He lifted a heavy boot, and laid a hard, vicious kick into Viktor's thigh.

There was a louder crunch. Viktor cried out, and curled inwards onto the street. Vi gripped Jayce's elbow so hard that he grunted in pain, and he felt her whole body strung tight.

The tall Enforcer sighed. "That wasn't necessary."

The other shrugged. "Fun, though," he said. "Good luck spreading those broken legs tonight, sump-slut." He nudged Viktor's leg with the toe of his boot, snickering as he drew a sharp gasp from the kneeling man.

He stepped back, and the pair re-joined. They finally turned away and wandered down the road. They walked slowly. Unbothered.

Jayce began to gasp. Adrenaline surged through him, and his vision was clouding a little. That was too fucking close. *They almost caught me. And they almost— Viktor—*

Vi let out a shaky breath. "Jayce," she said, stepping in front of him and gripped both arms. "I need your crutch."

He looked at her wildly, words barely registering.

How is she so calm?

"Don't have time for this," she muttered. Vi tugged on one of the crutches. As it slipped out of his grasp, he clung to the other, almost falling.

Jayce watched as if in a dream as Vi crouched beside Viktor. She placed a hand on his shoulder, murmuring softly. Viktor gathered his legs beneath him, shaking. He stood and grabbed desperately onto the offered crutch, face deathly pale.

Viktor took a shaky hop. Part of his leg brace fell to the street with a clatter. He didn't even look at it, just took another step.

"Good work, jawline," he said breathlessly. He flashed him a weak grin. "Let's get out of here."

Jayce's mouth dropped. After a few moments, he hopped along behind them.

"That— shit, that was—"

"Not yet," Vi said sharply.

The three hobbled down the street, approaching the cluster of people that Vi had first spotted. Jayce counted maybe five polished blue uniforms, and half a dozen undercity folk. Vi steered them close to the opposite wall, one hand curled instinctively into a fist.

As they drew nearer, Jayce saw that some of the people were arguing back. Someone gesturing angrily, stepping closer to an Enforcer.

Jayce halted in shock.

Cait?

The Enforcer had a similar build, tall and slim. But the height might be wrong. He frowned, watching carefully.

In one quick movement, she grabbed the undercity boy. He was tall and gangly, a teenager at most. The Enforcer turned

him roughly and pressed his face to the wall. *Definitely not Cait, wrong height.* She searched the boy, arms twisted hard behind his back as she rifled through his pockets. *Definitely...*

Jayce felt the metal container shift in his chest pocket, and panic flushed through him.

The undercity boy bucked back, shouting something at her. The Enforcer pushed him harder against the wall, one hand on the side of his head.

He spat. The glob landed on her shiny boot. She looked down at it, then seemed to sigh, shaking her head.

She took a step back, leaving the boy standing against the wall.

In one fluid movement, she drew her weapon. She barely aimed.

She pointed it at his head, and pulled the trigger.

Jayce gasped. The world around him disappeared. He wished he could shut his eyes, block out the red splatter on the brick wall. The way the kid dropped like a stone. But he couldn't look away.

The Enforcer turned slowly. She said something to one of the other Enforcers. His chest shook as he laughed.

As he laughed.

Jayce kept staring, fixated on the—

"Jayce." Vi was in front of him again, gripping his arms. He craned his head to look around her, to look at the crumpled—

"*Jayce*." She slapped him, hard, across the face. He gasped, cheek stinging, world tuning back in around him. Suddenly the sounds of the street were loud in his ears, and he could barely hear Vi. But her face swam into focus. Her eyes were wide.

"Move," she hissed. "Or I'll drag you."

She took his arm in a vice-tight grip, and he took a wavering

step. He didn't know where Viktor was.

Just a kid.

He looked down at the stones as they passed below him. He became numbed by the rhythm of the crutch and Vi's steps. Time passed, he had no idea how long they walked for. It played over and over again in his mind, every moment clear, every detail crisp. *It couldn't be Cait. It wasn't. The height was wrong. She's shorter. It couldn't be. She would never. She would...*

"Here," Vi said finally, pulling him to the side. They stood before a long, narrow tunnel between two buildings, tucked away out of sight. Jayce leaned against the wall, trembling.

Crunching, lurching footsteps came towards him, and he turned to see Viktor. *Thank god.* He must have been just a few steps behind them. His face was still tight and pale, his cheekbones more hollow than usual.

"Can we— please, can we stop," Jayce said, broken.

"Yeah," said Vi. "We'll be okay here."

Jayce fell to his knees. He slumped against the cold wall and leaned the side of his head on the stone. His breath rushed in and out, coming faster.

That was horrible. That was the most horrible thing I've ever seen.

He felt shuffling movement, and opened his eyes to see that Viktor was leaning on the wall beside him. His blue-clad hip was a few inches from Jayce's face. Jayce squeezed his eyes shut again.

He couldn't stop himself from leaning forward, forehead resting against Viktor's firm body.

He felt the man's thigh tense under him for a moment. Then, light fingertips touched the crown of his head. He whimpered, feeling at once like he would cry and like he could never cry again. Viktor's fingers traced over his scalp, stroking his hair

in small movements. Jayce trembled. With each sweep of his fingers, just a little more tension drained from his body.

Vi paced up and down beside them, feet stomping into the stones. With a loud grunt, she kicked the wall.

"I hate not *doing* anything when those *golden shits* just get to *fucking—*" She kicked the wall again, cutting off with a cry.

"I'm sorry, Jayce," she said eventually, breathing heavily. Her voice turned bitter. "Welcome to the Lanes."

"How often does that happen?" His voice cracked.

She walked away a few steps. "I know a few people who've gone that way."

Jayce opened his eyes slowly. Viktor's leg came into view before him. The metal brace was sharply dented, pressing deep into the skin at some points, breaking through his thin pants. There were a few smears of blood.

"Your leg," he breathed.

The fingers stroked again through his hair, all the way down to the base of his skull.

Viktor sighed. "Yes, the brace is quite damaged. It will be a pain to rebuild."

"I meant your *leg*, Viktor! Is it broken?" Jayce pulled away and looked up at him, shocked.

Viktor gave him a small smile. "It will survive, Jayce Talis." He brushed his fingers once more through his hair, beside his ear. "As will I. And as will you."

Jayce looked up at him, breathless. His eyes were deep and unreadable.

"We're almost there," he murmured. "Your friends are waiting."

Your friends. Jayce felt something well up in his chest. It gave him the strength he needed to grip his crutch tight, and with a

hand from Vi, push back up to stand.

Her steel eyes were brittle as they met his. Their hands were still clasped, and he felt her strength as she looked deep into him, searching for something.

Jayce didn't know what she saw there. But her eyes softened. She gripped his arm, helping him hop forwards once more. He followed Viktor down the tunnel, towards the light at the end.

4

Viktor

Viktor sighed as the warm, green-dappled sun fell on his face. There was nothing like that feeling, the sunlight soaking into his bones. He looked up into the twisting tree.

Home.

Even though he loved his little house, its crazy cramped laboratory, and his own space…he did get lonely there. And there was something about this tree.

A fluttering firelight drifted around his head. It gave a strange noise, and as he looked more closely, he realised it was metal wings clinking together.

"You get through all right, buddy?" Jinx sat on a tree branch above the walkway, feet swinging. Then she cocked her head as she noticed his leg. "Oh. I guess not."

He shrugged one shoulder. One of the cuts was really beginning to sting, and he saw a few drops of blood fall onto the metal walkway.

"I'll get the whatsimacallit," she said.

"No, I'm fine-" But she had already zipped away along the branch with a pink flash and a swirl of her braids.

Viktor approached the railing. He leaned his weight through his hands with a grateful sigh, taking the weight off his leg. A few people were gathered around the base of the tree below him. Some teenagers chatted and laughed, two of them play-wrestling.

Viktor thought of the boy in the alley. He wondered if he'd ever come to the Firelight tree. If he knew of it.

Would he be safe if he had? Would it make a difference?

How are we going to fit all the boys of the Undercity beneath the branches of one tree?

He gazed out, lost in thought. After a minute, he heard a whirring noise. Jinx was crouched in the seat of a hovering chair, splattered with neon monkeys and firelights. Lights glowed blue and pink, and the chair gave off puffs of colourful smoke.

Although anyone visiting the Firelights could use the chair if they needed it, it was Viktor's most of the time. Jinx drove it along the walkway towards him at uncomfortably high speed.

"Did you fix the suppressor pads yet?" Viktor called out, arcing an eyebrow.

"Nah!" she replied. "Might slow it down!"

"That would be the idea, yes," he said drily. She parked it behind him and hopped off. He settled into the seat with a groan.

She crouched on the ground before him, looking over his leg with a critical eye. She pulled a slim screwdriver out from where it was wedged into one of her braids.

"Ready?" She held it up and wiggled it before him. He nodded, muscles tensing as—

He hissed as Jinx extracted a piece of the brace from his skin. It clattered onto the ground beside her. She was surprisingly gentle, tongue sticking out just slightly as she focused on Viktor's torn flesh.

"There. No more machine." Jinx frowned at the deep, vicious bruises. She looked around quickly, then up at Viktor.

Jinx pulled her other braid over her shoulder. She parted a few strands. Viktor could see a small vial of purple, glowing liquid nestled there.

Jinx cocked her head at him silently.

He looked quickly across at Ekko and the others, though he knew they were too far away to see. The glimmer of purple drew his eye again.

His body ached for the Shimmer. There was nothing like the feeling of *power* that flowed through him with just a little sip, washing away all his pain. He swore he could almost run when he was on it.

The pain always came back, though. And left that panging emptiness behind. He'd gone through his last vial far too fast.

"Later," he muttered. But gods, would he crave it later. *What a day.*

She met his eye and nodded. Her thumb stroked lightly over a bruise.

"They wouldn't judge you for it, y'know," she said.

He knew. He was very grateful that Jinx had never asked any questions, when he'd first whispered to her that he'd like to try a bit. And it's not like he thought Ekko would judge, not really, he would understand. And Vi, certainly. He just…

He should be strong enough to live without it. He didn't like to need it. He didn't *need* it. He looked down as hot shame rose in his cheeks.

Jinx squeezed his good knee. "How bad were the blueys?"

Viktor sighed. "Got another kid."

"Golden *shits*," Jinx said viciously. Her eyes glowed pink. "Vi should've let me at them."

"That would've brought all Piltover down on us."

She kicked the railing. "I *know* that," she sulked. "I'm sure we need jawline for her big plans, something something. Boring." She glared further down the walkway. Jayce was seated on a bench with Vi and Ekko, deep in conversation. No doubt catching him up on the tree, the Firelights, the community here. His eyes were hollow. Viktor could see that his hands had not yet stopped trembling.

"How'd the Piltie take it?" Jinx asked. "Popped his little dead-people cherry, I'm sure."

Viktor shrugged. "Admirably, all things considered."

""Admirably,"" she snorted. "I think you liiike him."

Viktor rolled his eyes. "He clearly has an…intriguing mind."

Jinx gave a rasping laugh, jumping up onto the back of the chair onto a miniature seat there. It was purpose-built for her to perch on as Viktor moved around the tree. "You know, those crystals of his have gotta do more than just explode. Some big old bomb wouldn't be worth all this trouble. I could cook one of those up easy and I'm way less popular with topside."

"Hmm." Viktor frowned to himself. *That's true. 'Hextech', he called it.*

Vi turned to them. "Oi!"

Jinx stuck her tongue out at her from above his head. Viktor's fingers rested on the joystick, and with a nudge, the chair glided forward.

"We're going to my lab," Ekko said. "Piltie's got something to show us."

Jayce's clear bronze eyes met his. Viktor remembered the tunnel, the weight of the man's head on his hip. Viktor had been surprised at first, and almost hadn't returned the touch of the near-stranger. But oh, how Jayce had shivered when Viktor first traced his fingers over his scalp. He'd looked up at Viktor with haunted eyes, broken in a way that he knew would heal like a bone set wrong.

That shadow was still there now. But there was determination, too.

"Come on. I'm going to give you magic."

* * *

Turns out *giving them magic* was going to take a while.

Ekko's lab was on one of the higher levels of the compound, almost completely immersed in the tree's leaves. The chair rattled alarmingly as he rose up into the branches along a modified track. Jinx just shrugged when he pointed it out.

"It's no fun when they make no noise!"

Now, they all sat in a corner of the lab. He spoke softly with Vi as Ekko sketched. Jinx tinkered with loose parts, her head in Ekko's lap.

Jayce was perched on a stool at the large centre table. Beside him was a mound of paper from Ekko. His hand had not stopped moving for about half an hour now as he scribbled, muttering to himself. He reached the end of a page and slid it in Viktor's direction.

Viktor reached for the new sheet, eyes scanning over the scientist's theory. His eyes were drawn again to the crystals.

They lay in the centre of the table on a small device, glowing mysteriously.

"So if stabilised, it's…an energy source?"

"Maybe?" Jayce said. His voice was far away.

Viktor waited, reading over another few sheets as Jayce produced them.

"Ah," he said softly. "Wait a moment, these frequencies, you could go much higher."

"Too unstable," Jayce muttered.

"Hmm," said Viktor. "But higher oscillations might actually stabilise it. What if you—"

"Crank it!" Jinx yelled from the corner with a cackle.

Jayce snorted, eyes still distant. Then his hand began to slow. He looked up, and looked at Viktor like he had just set the sun in the sky.

"Crank it," he breathed.

Viktor chuckled, and moved his chair around the table. "Over here, Jayce Talis. If I'm not wrong, we'll need an oscillator for this, which I think Ekko keeps—"

* * *

They worked for hours. Dusk fell. Ekko left to fetch some supplies from Benzo's, and returned an hour later with a bulging, clanking bag tied precariously to his hoverboard. Jinx crouched on the table, welding rusty wires together into a cage. It was a loose imitation of Jayce's sketch, depicting the elegant equipment from the Academy. But they were all used to slapping odd scrap metal together and making do.

Jayce slotted gears into place with a fervour that Viktor knew well. It could bring about marvellous science, but it was sloppy. He calmly followed the man around the lab, tightening his handiwork, fixing misaligned parts. Jinx or Ekko usually followed in his wake when he was in this state, or he for them.

The love of a scientist.

Another hour passed. Vi was in the corner, sparring with a boxing bag, as she often did while they tinkered.

Viktor poured over Jayce's equations, double checking the numbers. Jayce, Ekko, and Jinx were testing the device on the table.

Jayce turned, running a hand through his hair. "Viktor, I think— I think we're ready."

Viktor smiled. "Time to…crank it?"

Jinx giggled wildly. Viktor's chair whirred as he approached the table.

Jayce placed a crystal gently in the metal centre. Deep fear flashed across his face as his finger hovered over the button.

Then he pressed down. The device whirred into life, spinning. The crystal leapt up and suspended itself in the air. Wild blue crackles leapt from its surface, and the whole room glowed with bright, harsh light. The four of them watched, gripping the table tight, eyes wide as strange runes lifted from the crystal's crackling surface.

Jayce reached for part of the device. He twisted, eyes feverish as they drank in the runes before him. Viktor had no idea how he knew which way to turn, what to refine. He felt a great otherness yawning between them, reaching through, guiding the man. Jayce's eyes popped open, and met his, and Viktor knew he felt it too.

They were the last thing Viktor saw before a white-blue blast

exploded through the lab.

A loud chime rang out.

And they were floating.

Viktor laughed at the weightlessness, bending his leg freely with a groan of satisfaction. Jinx turned somersaults, giggling. Ekko and Vi almost collided, then pushed each other away, tumbling through the air playfully.

Jayce's eyes were wide with wonder. He picked up a small gear, and pushed it towards the centre of the glowing orb. It zipped through with a ringing noise, and Viktor caught it lightly. He met Jayce's gaze with a wide smile.

"Magic," Viktor breathed.

"Hextech," he mouthed back. Viktor laughed, pushing the gear back towards him. It zinged through the crystal again, and Jayce caught it.

* * *

"What do you do with something that makes stuff float?"

"Enemy-float-away-erer? Device? Ugh," Jinx grumbled. They all lay on the ground, the crystal having finally lost power.

"If I could punch someone with like, giant hands, and make them fly away from me, I'm so in," Vi said.

"Huh. I could make a go-away gun and calibrate it to 'sisters only'," Jinx said. Vi crawled towards her to punch her arm. Jinx zapped away with a flash of pink light, hovering over her and poking Vi's cheek before disappearing again.

"I'm gonna make magic Hex-whatever-chains to tie you down with! Sisters only!" Vi shouted.

Ekko snorted. "I'm in. She likes stealing my snacks just as I'm about to eat them."

"I wanna float again!" Jinx called out.

Viktor was only half-listening. He was watching Jayce, curled up on the floor. His face was wet with tears.

Viktor rolled over so he was in the man's eyeline. "You did it," he whispered.

Jayce's eyes refocused, finding him. "We did it." His smile was radiant.

* * *

They sat in a circle, passing the crystals around to each other slowly.

"I want you to use them," said Jayce said, looking at Vi. "For Zaun."

"And do what?" she said, grey eyes weary. "There isn't even a *Zaun* yet."

"There would be weapons," said Viktor carefully. "The likes of which Piltover has never seen. We'd have an incredible advantage."

"Look at you, water filter boy," said Jinx, raising her eyebrows.

Viktor sighed. "War is inevitable. And, as much as I find it… distasteful, it will be necessary. But think of what comes *after* the war. Imagine, if this can make large objects weightless—"

"Mirrors," said Ekko softly. He stared into nothing, rolling a crystal between his fingers. "We could take giant, floating mirrors. Suspend them, and shine sunlight down into the Lanes. There'd be plants again. More than just one tree."

They were all quiet for a while.

"Vander avoided fighting topside," said Vi eventually, thoughtful. "Because we were going to lose, too many of us would die. The price was too high." She gripped the crystal in her hands. "But with this, we could demand *anything* we wanted from them. Kick the Enforcers out for good. No more dying in the mines. No more scraps and slops. Do things *our* way, finally."

"We'd need the Lanes," said Ekko. "United, for once. Not just to fight, but…" He looked at Viktor, his eyes hopeful. "After."

"We can do that," Vi said.

"*Can* we?"

She smiled at him. "We all get along, don't we?"

"Overstatement," Jinx grumbled. Vi reached over to tug on one of her braids, and Jinx slapped her hand away.

Jayce ran a hand through his hair. "Look, I don't know what it can do yet. The mage, when I was a child, travelled great distances. Maybe I can replicate that?" I don't—" He broke off, an exhausted look falling over his face. "Right now, they're just impressively explosive rocks. I don't think that helps anyone."

Ekko twisted around for his sketchbook. He flipped back a few pages.

"Jayce, uh…I was talking with Vi earlier. Trying to get this looking right. But, it sounds like you saw it the most clearly." His eyes were sad. "It's the boy."

Jayce froze for a moment. Then he held out a hand, and Ekko passed over the sketch.

He looked at it for a long time. "Can I have a—"

Ekko handed his charcoal over. Jayce traced a few extra lines, and rubbed some away.

As he did so, Jinx jumped up and fetched something from the corner. Her project from earlier.

"More like this," Jayce said finally, holding the sketch out.

"And this little guy?" Jinx said. She held a small doll, with a metal head and torso. He had nuts for hands and feet, flopping as Jayce turned it over tenderly. The boy's rough features were painted on.

Jayce smiled, and just nodded.

"What will you do with it?"

Ekko rose to stand. "Bring him home."

* * *

They descended to the base of the tree. At night, little green firelight bugs glowed everywhere, the flesh-and-blood kind instead of Jinx's toys. A few people were still out and above, chatting. Someone was grilling something on a small fire, a delicious smell in the air.

Jayce stood before the mural of those lost. He balanced on his crutches as he took in every face slowly. Beside the mural was a tall, rickety set of shelves built into the wall. Jinx's dolls lined each shelf. She'd added Claggor and Mylo to the ofrenda a few months ago, when Ekko had begun bringing her to the tree regularly. One day, a child asked her to make one of their father. Now she made one for anyone who asked. There was a few dozen, large and small, eclectically made. They all included a small detail of the person gone. Jinx cocked her head as looked over the shelves, rtying to decide where the boy would live now.

Something crossed Viktor's mind.

"Wait," he said to her. She frowned at him, and came over.

He held out a hand, and Jinx gave him the doll reluctantly.

Viktor fished a screwdriver out of the arm of the chair, holding it over the doll's metal torso. Closing his eyes, he concentrated, bringing the shape forward in his mind.

He dug the sharp point into the metal, ignoring Jinx's twitch. He worked for a while, scratching the lines over and over.

"There." He held it up to the light. Jayce's rune was etched there. Viktor was sure the lines were right, he had traced it out several times just earlier from Jayce's notes.

Acceleration.

"Jayce," Viktor called softly. Jayce turned from the wall, his bronze eyes still far away.

Viktor held up the doll. Jayce came over, sitting on a bench beside Viktor in his chair.

Jayce took the doll. His thumb traced over the grooves. A look of wonder fell over his face as he looked at Viktor.

"Perfect," he breathed.

"Fuck yeah, let's accelerate this shit," Jinx said with a grin. She plucked the doll from Jayce's hand and danced up to the wall. She moved a few dolls, and found a place for him in the centre.

Jayce cleared his throat. He was shorter than Viktor at the moment. Viktor pressed a few buttons on the chair, and it lowered to the ground beside him with a puff of pink smoke.

"Viktor," he said, voice gruff. "I…I'm very lucky to have met you all. I'm just, I'm grateful I met…you."

Viktor smiled to himself as the tall man stumbled over his words. He'd looked at that Piltover face and thought Jayce Talis may be all kinds of things. Overly confident, egotistical, self-important.

He was realising very quickly that he couldn't be more wrong.

"We are lucky that you're handing this over so openly," Viktor said.

"I talked about doing good with Hextech, and helping people. But—" he huffed a laugh. "I had no idea what I was talking about. I was thinking of helping artisans and courtiers, and some vague notion of saving the Undercity. If Piltover had ever let me make Hextech— well, I couldn't have done it anyway, not without you." His eyes glowed at him. "But even if I had, they probably would have just used it to crush the Undercity further."

"Yes," Viktor snorted. "There is no doubt."

"I…look, I'm going to need a lab, to keep building Hextech. Somewhere to stay." He looked down, a thumb smoothing over the stone on his wrist, the rune there. Viktor could already tell it was a nervous habit of his. "Someone to do this with. A, uh…a partner."

Viktor reached forward. He drew Jayce's wrist towards him, fingertips replacing his as he traced the rune. *Yes, I got the shape right.* He could hear Jayce's breath catch. His wrist was burning hot under his fingers, and he felt the muscles shift.

"Are you asking to move in, Jayce?" Viktor looked up at him, a smile teasing at his lips.

Jayce's eyes widened. "No! I— well, I can find somewhere else to stay, just near to your lab maybe, or here! I can ask Ekko, or—"

Viktor cut him off with a chuckle, squeezing his wrist. "Jayce, I would be honoured to help you. You may stay. And my lab is yours."

Jayce let out a breath. "Ours," he said firmly. "We do this as partners."

Viktor felt his own hand tremble. He was used to collaborators, yes. Friends, even, who he allowed to care for him, as he cared for them. Jinx and Ekko and Vi, other Firelights, other

friends in the Lanes.

But he did most things alone. He was accustomed to that. He liked it that way.

But this damn Piltie was looking at him, eyes round and eager and afraid.

"Partners," he murmured. And Jayce's hand laid over his.

II

Act II

5

Vi

"'Course the bastard's late," Sevika grumbled. "I don't miss that."

Gert snorted as she poured their drinks with a careful hand, the strongest stuff under the bar. The Last Drop was quiet. Half the chairs were on the table, and a few last patrons lounged in the booths. Gert would chase them out soon.

"Thanks," said Vi, as Gert slid her glass across the bartop. "I'm glad you wanted to be around for this."

She shrugged. "Be good to meet the guy myself. You hear a lotta things."

"The more people at the table, the better." Vi saw her wince as she reached for a glass to polish. "Sorry, that last punch was pretty hard."

Gert smiled. "Don't be. Just a lesson for next time."

Sevika snorted. "So your little fight club's going well? You getting the Lanes ready to, what, punch Piltover into submission? Goddamn kids." She straddled the barstool,

drinking deeply.

"You can laugh, Sevika," Vi said. She leaned forward, "But I know you left Silco for a reason. From what Jinx tells me, you actually give a shit about the Lanes."

Sevika glared at her. "I got a heart in here. Silco got too comfortable with beating on our own people. Didn't need to be the one doing the beating, that's all."

Vi's knee pressed to the inside of the older woman's thigh. "You want to fight for Zaun as much as we do."

"Is that what this is about? Want me to help you kids get yourselves killed, trying to go up against blue-bellies?"

"We've got some ideas that might surprise you." Vi pressed a little harder.

Sevika rubbed a thumb over her bottom lip with a frown.

Before she could answer, the door of the Last Drop swung open. Silco passed through the doors like a ghost. He stood tall as ever, in a long black coat. As requested, he was alone. He halted and scanned over the Last Drop carefully, cautiously, before stepping in. As he approached the bar, the other patrons noticed him. They downed their last drinks and hurried out.

"Ah, the Last Drop," he said with a sigh. "It *has* been a while."

"This is a one-off," Vi warned him. "Still our bar. And you're still not welcome."

"But of course." Silco slid onto a barstool. "Apologies for the delay. I was tying up a loose end."

Vi shivered. She knew what that likely meant. Hopefully, a dead Enforcer…but probably not.

"So, you're doing your own dirty work these days?" Sevika raised an eyebrow.

"Unfortunately, I am. You are proving as invaluable as I always knew you were." His cold eyes rested commandingly on Gert.

Wordlessly, she poured his drink. She lifted her chin as she slid it towards him.

"And Jinx has been very absent these last few months, keeps coming up with excuses when I ask for her assistance. Something to do with you, no doubt?" He threw a glare at Vi, then slammed the drink back with a gulp. "Ah, lovely, the good stuff. You must have found my secret stash." He immediately slid it back for another. Gert poured it with a shake of her head and a small smile.

"She probably figured out what a piece of shit you are," Vi snapped.

"What a wonderful start to the meeting," he said drily.

Sevika snorted. "Agreed."

Vi sighed. *Fuck, I'm no good at talking. Not like I can punch them into this, though.* She eyed Sevika. *Although I'm not ruling it out.*

Gert met her gaze and gave her a small nod. *You can do this.*

"Let's talk about Zaun." Vi downed the rest of her drink and glared at Silco. "Actually, let's *not* talk about Zaun. Because all you've done since the war is *talk* about our independence."

"I'm the *only* one talking about independence," Silco glared back. "Too many *chem-rats* out there just want to keep their heads down. And don't get me started on the barons. No one in these godforsaken Lanes has any vision."

"I agree. They're afraid," said Vi. "But we have something that will change that."

Sevika looked at her sharply.

Here we go. Let's let the magic cat out of the bag.

Vi reached into her pocket, and felt the cool round shape there. She pulled out a glowing gemstone. Whole, and unbreakable. *Those boys are a marvel.* In just a year flat, they had churned out

invention after invention. First, the gemstones. Then plenty of tools and weapons for them. And then their latest project, these strange gates. They'd managed to keep Hextech a careful secret from the rumour mill of the Lanes. But it was time for the next steps, and they couldn't do it alone.

"May I?" Silco reached out curiously.

Vi passed the gemstone to Sevika first, who chuckled. She rolled it slowly in her fingers.

"Okay, what's the glowy rock do?"

"It's an energy source. It can make all kinds of things. Including…this." Vi left her stool and rounded the counter behind the bar. There, tucked out of sight beside Gert, were her gauntlets.

She placed her hand inside into the machine's comforting shape. It engaged with a hiss, suddenly light as a glove.

She lifted her hand into view, raising her fist. The whole bar lit up with glowing blue. Sevika's grey eyes were wide.

Silco just looked hungry.

"It's called Hextech," she said. "Piltover has no idea what it is or how it works."

"And how did you get your rather…oversized hands on that?" Silco asked.

"Long story." She walked back around the bar, standing between the two of them. "With this, we have weapons that they can't even imagine. Or, prepare a defence for."

"Good for a war," Silco mused.

"It is," said Vi. "But that's not all. We've found we can make people and objects travel long distances, in just the blink of an eye."

Silco raised his eyebrows. "Fascinating." His eyes had not left the gauntlet.

"Yeah, and to us, not very useful. Or should I say, not as useful as it is to you."

His eyes snapped to hers.

"Right now, you run the Lanes because you line Piltie pockets. You make the blue-bellies look the other way, so you can get your shit in and out of the ports." She stepped closer to him. "Send messages to your contacts in other cities. The next batch of Shimmer is going to appear on their doorstep. Literally."

Silco looked away, but not before Vi caught the gleam in his eye.

"No more greasing Enforcer palms," said Sevika slowly. "I like it. But why are you handing this over to Silco?"

"I'm not," said Vi. She looked at her. "I'm handing this over to everyone. It's yours, too." She lifted her chin. "Zaun will trade without Piltover."

"I see," said Silco slowly. "You've certainly played your hand, though. All trade, bottlenecked through your little…magic teleport device? I could just take it. If I control all trade, I would rule…completely."

Vi sighed. *Now the hard bit.*

"You won't," she said softly. "Because with this, and with these weapons…we can finally have Zaun. We can be *completely* independent. Don't need to pull rocks out of the ground for Piltover, we can kick the bosses out and sell it ourselves. Don't need their fancy technology to clean the air, we have what we need. We can *rebuild* this city."

"Cut Piltover off and keep our resources for ourselves? They'll come for us," said Sevika.

Vi squeezed her hand in the glove, letting off a hiss of steam. "And we'll be ready. We kick them out, and they stay out. No Enforcers in the Lanes, not ever again."

There was a look on Sevika's face that Vi hadn't seen before. A softness. "It *is* Zaun," she breathed.

"Yes," said Vi.

But Sevika had been the easy one.

Vi stepped closer to Silco. The creases in his face were thrown into sharp relief by the overhead lamp. His fingers toyed with his glass as he watched her closely.

"You're going to play along, Silco," she said softly. "No power grabs."

"And why would I do that?"

"Because I remember you. I must have been about six years old." She focused on his round, watery blue eye. "In this very bar. I fell, scraped my knee. Right over there." She nodded towards the closest booth. Silco's gaze didn't budge, fixed on her. "You picked me up, and put me in that booth. Painted a sun over the bloody bit with the antiseptic stuff and told me I was tougher than some floorboard." She smiled, something tugging in her chest.

His eye blinked. "I forgot that."

"I don't remember much else," she said. "But I remember you. And him. And—"

She broke off for a moment, looking down at the bartop, as familiar to her as the back of her hand. "Vander was wrong. He worked with the Enforcers. He gave up on Zaun. I know why he did it, but—" She shook her head.

"He was weak," Silco hissed.

"Vander was *wrong*," she said again, voice hard. "Because he gave up, he gave in to the cycle of power. He *let* Piltover stay in control. You're the only one around here talking about anything else."

Sevika grunted, and Vi threw her a look.

"But if we're gonna do this, and we *can*—" She curled her fingers so that the glove gave off another hiss. "We're breaking that cycle. And that means no more masters. Not them, and not you."

Vi stared deep into that blue eye, and saw it waver.

"He tried to *kill me*," Silco bit out.

"Don't forgive him, then. He's dead," she snapped. "But I'm not. Jinx isn't. And the people of the Lanes, maybe they'll forgive you for all you've done. If you stop killing our own, and help us build something *different*."

Silco finally looked away, his expression unreadable. He took a slow sip.

Sevika had a brooding look in her eye. "So, what're you saying? Who gets all these weapons, Vi? You and your buddies?"

She sighed, suddenly bone-weary as the weight of that question settled on her shoulders. She, Jinx, Ekko, the others, Firelights, a bunch of other Undercity folk…they had talked this round in circles for months. They had no good answers. Handing Silco the weapons to cement his control in the Undercity seemed foolish. But if they kept hold of all the powers of Hextech…what would stop them from being the next Silco?

"No? Don't know yet. But it'll be whoever Zaun needs, not just me."

"And what's your plan? What happens next?"

She sighed. "You tell me, Sevika. What's a smart next step?" Vi looked at them both. "Because at the end of the day, you're both a part of Zaun whether I like it or not. If we're building this thing, it's not about me and my ideas. It's ours. This isn't just about the Lanes finally telling Piltover where to shove it, or flattening those nice buildings. If we're going to do things differently, it starts *here*. This is going to be a community. And

it needs you both."

They were both silent for a long time.

Finally, Sevika slid her glass to Gert. She looked across at Silco.

"Kids," she grumbled. "Annoying fucking idealists."

He snorted. "You jumped ship because my methods weren't *ideal* enough for you."

"I jumped ship because it seemed like your dreams of Zaun were a crock-of-shit lie. That you were just using it so you could control everything, kill whoever you liked, and still sleep at night." She sighed. "This idiot, and probably her sister, believe there's more to you. And they damn well might be right."

"And you?" he said archly.

She shrugged. "I'm not that trusting." She looked at Vi. "But I like this. Didn't know you had Vander's knack for talking people into shit, kid. He would've liked this, too."

Vi couldn't stop a flush creeping up her neck, unable to reply.

"We'll talk soon," she said, shooting a look at Gert, who nodded. Sevika downed the last of her drink, and grabbed the gemstone from the bartop.

"Gonna keep this. I'm sure that's okay with you, given all that stuff about how *it's all ours, not mine or yours*." She snorted, then gave Vi one last, appreciative look before striding out of the Last Drop.

Silco took another sip. His eye darted around the bar, and he looked up into the rafters above for a long moment.

He finally sighed. "Kids," he echoed with a shake of his head. He stood gracefully from his stool. "I will…need to consider."

"Of course," said Vi.

"I will take a gemstone as well," he said coldly.

Vi hesitated. But Sevika was right. They had agreed to let

them both take a gemstone, as a show of faith.

She leaned down and placed the glove on the ground, extracting her hand and tapping the gem so it popped out into her fingers.

Silco stepped towards her, and the blue glow lit his face from below as she held it up to him. His pale fingers reached out.

"Yes, they would be proud," he whispered. Without another word, he plucked the gem from her grasp, and swept past her. The doors swung shut as he disappeared into the night.

Vi collapsed onto a bar stool.

"That went pretty fucking well," said Gert, pouring Vi one last drink.

"You think?" She rubbed a hand over her forehead.

"Yeah. I mean, that's definitely a man who's pulled out a fingernail before. But I think he listened."

"I think Sevika liked the knee thing," a voice echoed from the rafters. Vi looked up. Jinx's braids dangled from up high. She swung from beam to beam, then dropped to the ground beside her with a thud. "Probably the main reason she's in. Good tactic, sis."

"If I ask her for…wrestling sessions, it's for the good of the cause, right?" Gert said with a sly smile.

Vi laughed. "Whatever works, Gert. *Wrestling sessions* is a solid recruitment strategy."

Jinx perched on the bar, and Gert passed her her usual juice.

"What did you make of Silco?" Vi asked her.

Jinx shrugged. "You made him real sad, so that's good." She looked at Vi for a moment. "He did that sun thing to me, too."

Memories of the Last Drop flooded back to her. Powder at the bar, giggling as she tinkered. Vander towering over them as he polished glasses, telling Vi to get her head out of her ass

about something or other. As much as Vi was coming to enjoy the sister beside her, and getting to know the Jinx she'd met after Stillwater…there was something they would never get back.

"You could've joined us, y'know. You might've swayed him."

A nervous look flashed over Jinx's face. "You didn't need me in the end," she mumbled. She sipped through her straw. "Besides, I'm no good with my knees."

Vi snorted. Gert held up her glass, and she and Jinx leaned in to give a clumsy cheers.

* * *

"Vi, someone dropped this off," Gert called out as she pushed her way into the Last Drop.

Vi approached the bar. There was a small brown bottle on the counter, with a scrap of paper tried around it.

"Took him a whole week," Gert grumbled.

Vi turned it over in her hands. Antiseptic fluid sloshed inside.

She pulled off the scrap and unfurled it.

To something different.

6

Ekko

Moonlight slanted through high windows, giving them plenty of light to work with. Jinx prowled ahead over the plush carpets of the Piltovian mansion.

She gave that bird-like cock of the head as she spotted a golden bowl, stashing it in a bag slung over her shoulder.

"This guy's a real peacock," she muttered to Ekko. "Only a real loser shows off by buying fancy *bowls*."

"I guess we'll pluck his feathers," he said, sharing a satisfied look. He leapt onto a cabinet and crouched beside a large painting of sweeping Noxian scenery. He brought a switchblade from his pocket, and carefully dug the blade into the edge where the painting met the frame and swept along the join.

"Can't believe you're going for the boring splatters," Jinx grumbled.

"It's worth more than everything else in this room combined." He freed the painting from the frame and rolled it up carefully,

then jumped down.

"Can I blow stuff up now?"

He smiled at her. "Over here."

* * *

"Stupid—" Ekko grunted as he shook the device. It was a palm-sized disk with a gemstone glowing in its centre. He pressed in once more to the side of a wooden barrel, about as tall as he was. He wrinkled his nose at the heady fumes of Noxus' finest vintage. With a click, glowing rings of runes lifted from the disk's surface. Ekko gave a satisfied smile as the whole barrel rose several inches from the ground. He fiddled with the Hextech, extracting a small lead. He tugged on it, and the barrel floated smoothly along. A few dozen gallons of wine, heavier than a squad of blue-bellies, drifted down the hallway like a pet on a leash.

The light spluttered for a moment, and the lead went dark. "Fuck." He tugged, but the barrel was stuck, floating. He gave the gemstone a slap. The light flickered back on, and he pulled the barrel down the hall again.

"You know, we could've just destroyed the guy's booze stash where it was," he grumbled.

Jinx shot him a look over her shoulder, her arms full of bottles of amber liquid. "Oh c'mon, I know how happy you are to test that thing out in the field."

"On a barrel of wine? Worth a year's pay in the mines?" he scoffed.

Jinx rolled her eyes. "You know what your problem is, Ekko?"

She stepped out onto the balcony in the cavernous entrance hall. The chandelier behind her glittered in the moonlight.

"You got no appreciation for *flair.*" With a grunt, she heaved the bottles over the railing. A moment later, there was a crystalline crash. Jinx cackled, then leapt over the railing after them.

Ekko smiled to himself. *Fuck, I love that girl.*

He yanked the barrel forwards until it drifted over the railing, out into empty space. It hovered just below the chandelier.

He held tight to the lead, and pressed a small button at the end.

The disc went dark and swung into his hand. The barrel dropped like a stone. It landed with a splintering crash, thick red liquid pouring out in a wave across the floor.

Ekko couldn't hold back a laugh. "Flair is definitely more fun."

"And mission still accomplished! So what are you waitin' for?" Jinx cackled and whipped out her spray paints. He watched as she spun through the hall, starting with painting a monkey on the wall, as she always did. Her braids twirled as she scaled the furniture, the stair railing, even the chandelier, as if they were the Undercity streets.

She threw a paint canister at him, and Ekko caught it awkwardly. Jinx landed with a thump beside him.

"What are ya gonna paint, bug boy?" She stood close, dangling a few different paints off her fingers.

He sighed. "We should get on with it. Someone might've heard the barrel crash."

"In a house this big? They'll barely hear the blast." She tilted her head, getting into his space. Her glowing pink eyes held his. It had been a few months since the accident, since she had

lost her old blue eyes. But Ekko found he didn't miss them. *The Shimmer suits her.*

"Ekko. C'mon. We're on mission, right? We've grabbed some top-notch rich Piltie shit to sell. We're fucking up some councillor's nice big house to scare the pants off them all. And you know what *really* scares those fuckers?" She dangled the paints again, and her eyes flashed pink. "A bunch of paint on their walls. Go figure."

He smiled. She took his hand, and her eyes softened as they met his.

"You gotta do more than fight, Ekko. You have to live. You have to *enjoy* this. You're the one who told me that."

Sadness washed through him. He swayed forward, and his forehead came to rest on hers, closing his eyes.

"I'm— God, Jinx. The fighting…" he finally whispered. "It's so hard. I don't enjoy it the way you do."

"I know," she whispered back. He opened his eyes slowly.

A wicked smile spread on her face.

"So try it my way."

That smile was infectious. EkkoHe couldn't help his own spreading over his face. The paint canister lay heavy in his hand.

She tugged him towards the stairs, and he considered his canvas carefully. He began painting in wide strokes, covering sidetables and vases and nice gold trimmings.

Jinx danced away to the next room over, working on her own masterpieces. He called out to ask for another colour, and she zapped over to him. She dropped the canister next to him, kissed him on the cheek, then zapped away again.

He turned back to his task, layering the paints carefully. He finally stepped back, adding a few final touches.

He'd covered half the wall in a dark, Piltover skyline. Towering above it was the High Council building, as imposing as ever. But its large, elaborate windows were shattered. Some kind of blast had obliterated the council room. Another image overlaid the night sky, hovering above the skyline. It was the golden gas mask of an Enforcer, the window of one eye shattered and empty.

"Red, please," Ekko called to Jinx. She flashed over to him, and smiled at his work.

"Can I?" she said.

"You want to do the best bit?" he asked, teasing.

"Yes!"

"You're not gonna let me do the most satisfying part?"

"Nuh uh!" She stuck her tongue out at him, holding the red canister high. "And you have to let me, cuz I'm *crazy*. Who knows what I'll do if you deny me nice things, bug boy?"

"Make more cute little bug versions of me that poop green powder?"

"Uh, *yes.* Maybe. Really scary bugs this time."

"*Crazy,"* he said fondly. "Of course you can do the fun bit."

She kissed him quickly. Then her arm lashed out. Red splattered over the empty eye socket, brighter than blood. They took it in together.

"One last touch," he said, taking the red can from her. He crouched, writing large, sprawling letters down the steps.

STAY OUT OF ZAUN

Satisfaction surged deep within him.

"Well, now we can't really blow the mansion up, can we?" Jinx sighed. "Would destroy your good work."

"This was *your* idea, Jinx."

"This is why I paint dumb shit! See?"

He turned. Painted in large, jagged letters on the floor: *Chemrats kissed here.* Over the large double doors, two cartoon rats kissed, one in pink paint and one in green.

Ekko grinned and reached for her hand. They kissed softly, and his hand rose to cup her cheek.

"Thank you," he breathed into her mouth.

"Hey, without you I'd still be a Silco's beck and call, doing whatever he wanted. Blowing shit up *for the cause* is much more fun."

"Speaking of…"

Jinx gasped and danced back. "Finally!"

She dashed around the hall one last time, dropping small metal monkeys on the windowsills, one in the puddle of fine spirits. Ekko nodded to himself. Blowing out the window would make it look like the whole place had blown to bits, while actually keeping the building pretty safe. Ekko set the hoverboard afloat and checked everything was secure, sliding his Firelight mask into place.

Jinx finished up with a cackle, and hopped onto the front of the board. "Okay. Outside. Let's get some Enforcer attention before we wake up the good councillor."

"Clever," he said as they zoomed towards the window.

"You should tell me that more often." They ducked together as they hit the night air with a shatter of glass.

He smiled. "Okay."

"N— Ekko!" she said with a huff. She tossed a blinking metal something onto the pathway below them as they dashed through the garden, then another. "You're too nice to me."

"I'm sorry, baby. I'll try and be meaner."

"What a *terrible* start."

A pack of Enforcers lounged at the mansion's front gates,

doing a very poor job of guarding the councillor's home tonight.

Ekko sank into a crouch. Jinx laughed wildly as they zoomed towards them. The Enforcers scrambled to their feet, shouting.

He weaved through the pack of them. Jinx reached out, monkeys clamping onto their clothes.

Eventually, some of them managed to get their guns out. Ekko dodged the bullets gracefully, then held tight to Jinx as they sped away. Jinx pulled a button from her pocket.

A cascade of loud, colourful *booms* began behind them as they whisked off into the night.

7

Viktor

Viktor poured tea into his mug and downed half of it in one gulp. He blinked blearily as he topped it up, leaning against his sink.

His legs trembled a little, weaker than usual, and there was an aching soreness in his hips. But a smile spread over his face as he remembered the feeling of a hot, wet mouth on his upper thigh. He loved the bone-deep, liquid, satisfied feeling after a long night.

His bedroom door creaked open.

"Viktor?" Jayce mumbled as he stepped out, hair a tousled mess. Viktor couldn't help a surge of pride at the trail of bite marks down his chest.

"Yes, Jayce. I'm here."

"*Viktor.*" He sighed his name like a prayer. He came over and wrapped his arms snugly around him from behind. It was like being squeezed by a rather soft furnace. Viktor leaned into him.

"Jayce," he whispered back. Jayce's soft beard tickled his face as his cheek brushed over his.

"I didn't know where you went. I wasn't sure if, last night…if you regretted—"

"No, Jayce. No." Viktor turned in his arms. He reached up to tuck a lock of Jayce's hair behind his ear. Those wonderful, warm eyes drank him in. Viktor had only seen that open adoration in glimpses, when Jayce didn't think he was looking.

Fear flashed through him. Gods, sleeping with his research-partner-slash-housemate-slash-maybe-best-friend? It had been a good year, wonderful even. Jayce had slipped so easily into Viktor's life; he had a way of filling spaces that Viktor didn't even know were empty. The way that little snacks just appeared at his elbow, when he was too absorbed in a new prototype to stop for food. How Jayce's eyes lit up as if he'd just hung the moon when Viktor complimented something he was working on, or thought to bring back some Piltovian food from the markets for him. The way those big, warm hands would rest on Viktor's shoulder, or waist, always for just a moment. Jayce never pushed or asked for more. *Waiting for him.*

And for a year, Viktor had kept him at arm's length. He played it safe, as he always did with his heart.

Now, Viktor's stomach twisted. "Do you? Regret—?"

Jayce's mouth crashed into his, cutting him off. They kissed, long and deep. His lips were already so familiar. Viktor pressed his tongue deeper into Jayce's mouth, and he opened happily beneath him.

Jayce broke away, and kissed the mole above Viktor's mouth. "You know, for someone so clever, sometimes you say silly things."

"I have been an idiot," Viktor admitted. "I'm sorry it took me

this long. I didn't want to lose…this. Lose you."

Jayce brushed his nose against Viktor's. "We're partners," he said simply. "As long as we're partners, that's more than enough."

Viktor wrapped his arms around Jayce's neck and drew them together, breathing in the cinnamonny musk that had slowly permeated his home. *His life.* He felt Jayce's arms tighten around him.

"Do you want to finally stop sleeping on the daybed, then?" Viktor murmured into his ear.

Jayce's laugh rumbled in his chest.

* * *

Viktor was straddling Jayce at the dining table, kissing lazily, when they heard the crash of the front door, accompanied by some of Vi's more colourful swearing.

Viktor sighed. "I guess we will have to finish that thought later," he murmured into his mouth.

"I hate being patient. Let's them there's a— a lab emergency. They have to leave immiedately." Jayce surged up for another kiss, but Viktor stood with a laugh. He collapsed onto the chair beside him. Jayce pulled it close, and rested a hand firmly on his thigh.

"I am sure they will not stay long." Viktor laced their fingers together as voices echoed from the lab.

"…no, Jinx, I *am* glad, it sounds like the job went well. You did good."

"Okay, just because I wanted you to be a bit more *grateful*, sis,

doesn't mean I wanted you to pat me on the head like I'm seven again."

Vi shoved the kitchen door open. "Morning." She didn't even glance at them as she scowled, heading straight to the teapot.

Jinx entered behind her, arms crossed. She stopped short at the sight of Jayce's hand on Viktor's leg and their we-just-fucked glow.

"*Finally*," she rolled her eyes. "Sis, I win. You and Ekko better cough up."

Vi turned with a frown as Viktor started to laugh. Her eyes lit up as she looked at the two of them properly.

"God, you idiots. What was that, a whole year?" Jayce blushed.

"You placed bets on when we'd fuck, did you?" Viktor said, raising an eyebrow. "Who bet what?"

"I said about a year," Jinx perched on a chair. "Vi thought it would take a week flat, but I think that says more about her than you." Vi tugged a blue braid as she walked past to take another seat, earning a glare from her sister.

"Ekko thought you'd both pine forever," Vi said. "He's gonna be mad he missed seeing the dopey looks on your faces. We'll let you get back to your *alone time* soon, okay?"

Jayce was laughing into his hand, face still red. Viktor just shrugged. "It's alright, we needed a bit of recovery period. But yes, that would be considerate, thank you. Maybe knock before entering for the next few days." They all laughed.

"Oh, let me make you some waffles, there's leftover batter!" Jayce leapt to his feet. He grabbed a screwdriver from the table as he went past, muttering to himself. "And I'll adjust the flow to that left corner, V's was a bit underdone…" The waffle iron glowed Hextech-blue on the counter.

Jinx sighed. "I love you, jawline."

"I'm sure it's not the first time he's hearing that today," muttered Vi, and Jinx broke out laughing again.

Jayce pottered in the kitchen as they chatted for a while.

Eventually, Viktor turned to the sisters. "What were you talking about as you got here?"

Vi shot Jinx a look. "She and Ekko got up to some mischief last night."

"Mischief?"

"Didn't see any good tech to pinch for you, sorry," said Jinx. "Just boring paintings. But Ekko used the thingy!"

"The deweighter?" He leaned forward. "Did the lead malfunction again?"

"I mean, it—"

"Silco put them up to it," Vi cut her off. Jinx glared.

"…and?" he said.

"See!" Jinx pointed at him triumphantly. "Ekko and I figured, we destroy the guy's nice booze stash like Silco said. He has to come to Silco's people to buy more, which Silco can get now because of the Hexgates. We get more money for the cause. And we scare a couple of rich Pilties as we go!"

"And more money ends up in Silco's pocket. What a coincidence," Vi said.

"Do you trust him or not, sis?" Jinx shot back. "It was your idea to go to him with Hextech."

"Yeah, I know. And he's proving pretty damn useful so far." Vi was silent for a moment, running her hand through her hair again. "I just wish you'd asked me first. That painting of Ekko's has really fired up topside. *Stay out of Zaun?* All that's gonna make them do is crack down."

"*Asked* you? For what, permission?" Jinx snarled.

"Maybe, yeah!"

"You sound waaay too much like Vander, sis. I finally do something to help with your stupid rebellion, and this is the thanks I get?" A vicious look flashed through her pink eyes.

"This isn't the kind of help we need!"

"Well, *I* think it is. And so does Ekko. You really need to stop treating me like I'm seven, *Violet*."

With a zap of pink, Jinx was gone. The front door slammed shut a moment later. Vi slumped forwards, head in her hands.

Jayce came to the table with two plates, piled high with waffles. He placed one down gingerly beside her. "Sorry, dude. That was harsh."

"Eh," Viktor shrugged.

Vi looked up with a glare. "She set fire to a councillor's mansion, without telling me! They attacked a bunch of Enforcers. I saw *double* the usual patrols on the way here, and it hasn't even been a day."

Viktor was quiet for a moment. Then he said; "And why would she need to tell you beforehand?"

Vi ran a hand through her hair. "Well, it was dumb."

"I disagree. It sounds like a well-executed move to me."

"Viktor," Jayce murmured. Viktor didn't look at him.

Vi glared. "I guess it would've been nice to know, is all. A head's up."

"Would you have said 'thank you for the head's up'? Or would you tell her she is not…*allowed*?" Viktor lingered on the last word. He did not break eye contact with Vi.

"Viktor, maybe just leave it for now—"

"Jayce, I'm going to show Vi the respect of being honest with her. I only hope that she would do the same for me," Viktor said shortly. Jayce paused, then sat beside him, saying nothing.

Vi's hands curled into fists. "Fine. I don't like that she did it

for Silco."

"Did she do it *for* him? Or did she decide to do it, based on her own judgements?"

"Yeah, sure, but—" She broke off, punching one fist into the other palm. "She has to think about how this reflects on us all! It's not— I had a plan, we weren't going to antagonise Piltover for a while, this might mess it all up."

"Did you *tell* her about this plan?"

"…no."

"Did she *agree* to this plan? To remain docile?" Viktor's tone was sharp.

Vi looked torn. "No."

"Did she agree to stay away from Silco and not include him in any of this? Which, as she pointed out, would be ironic, given that *you* wanted him in the fold in the first place?"

"I know. I just…it's still hard to trust him!"

"I'm sure it is," Viktor said. His voice turned soft. "But if you want everyone in Zaun to trust each other…you will have to do it as well."

"I just know how close they were. He might use her!"

"This isn't just about trusting Silco. You will also have to trust that your sister knows what she is doing."

Vi was quiet for a while. Viktor let her sit in it. Jayce fidgeted with a gear, tension radiating from him. Viktor rest a hand on his knee. *He does so hate conflict.*

But Viktor knew Vi could handle this.

Her voice was quiet when she finally spoke. "There's just… there's so much to do. It's all so fragile. What if this messes it all up? What if we…lose Zaun?"

Viktor waited until she looked at him, fear in her cloud-grey eyes.

"Vi. You do not carry this whole revolution on your back. We are here. This is for all of us, remember?" He sighed. "But, that means that people will do things that *you* don't want them to. And unless you want to rule with an iron fist, you will have to make peace with that."

They were all quiet for a while. Vi's hands trembled, then unfurled from their fists.

"Yeah," she muttered. "Yeah. I can't be Vander again. Keeping everyone else in line just cus you're afraid." She sat back, and pulled the waffles towards herself. She didn't quite look Viktor in the eyes as she took a bite.

He sat quietly, giving her time. It took her three large mouthfuls of waffle before she said; "Thanks, V."

"You are an exceptional person, Vi. I have faith in you. It's why I'm hard on you."

She took another bite. "I kmow," she mumbled. She rubbed a hand over her forehead, and swallowed. "Fucking sisters."

"I'm sure she'll come back to you," Jayce said softly.

"Yeah. I'm gonna go punch something first, though. Always gotta before apologising." She snorted. "And after."

"Did um—" Jayce cleared his throat. "Did Jinx kill anyone? Any…Enforcers?" His fingers turned a gear over and over again.

Vi shrugged. "She doesn't know."

Jayce nodded, his face tight. Viktor's stroked his thigh with his thumb. "Sorry," he said. "I just…I never know how I feel about that."

"You don' haff to," Vi said, mouth half full. "Just don' stop us." Viktor nodded in agreement.

Jayce looked torn, as he always did when this was brought up. After a moment, he pulled Jinx's discarded waffles towards him and helped himself to seconds. They chatted for a while about

lighter topics. The new soup kitchen that the Firelights had started up was going well, funded by the trade starting to flow through the Hexgates. Jayce had fallen off a Firelight board and decided it wasn't for him. A bunch of people wanted to learn about Hextech and help build devices with them, but Viktor was already hiding from the current batch. Their over-eagerness always gave him a headache.

Vi collected their plates and washed up. Jayce's fingertips stroked over Viktor's.

"Well, now that Jinx and Ekko pulled this stunt, it does change things," Vi said. She looked at Jayce. "If we're going to escalate, let's do it. You know what we talked about? Those friends of yours, the rich daughter and the fancy councillor?"

Jayce snorted. "*Friend* is a stretch, I've never really met the councillor. I don't even know if Cait can convince her to meet."

"Well, it's time to try," she said, eyes steely.

Jayce nodded slowly, a little worried. Viktor squeezed his fingers.

Vi finished the last dish. She and Jayce clasped hands, chatting about their next fighting session.

Viktor's attention wandered, and he felt a familiar tingle along his veins. An aching want.

Time for my morning dose. Then his breath caught as he looked down at his thighs.

He had not yet told Jayce about his injections. He made sure to perform them in the bathroom, with a kit he kept hidden in the old radiator. He had to do them out of sight, where Jayce couldn't see the telltale purple glow of Shimmer that suffused his body.

But he ran a hand over the outside of his thigh, over the needle site and surrounding bruise. It had become a permanent feature

of Viktor's leg over the past few months, as he crept from using it occasionally to most days, from every day to twice a day. Until now, he'd managed to hide it from Jayce under pants and skirts and towels after the shower.

Luckily, Jayce had been far too occupied last night to notice the marks. But undoubtedly, he would imminently.

Viktor felt a deep prickle of shame. Nowadays, the Shimmer only held his pain back for a few hours at most. But he desperately didn't want to take more than he was. Each morning, he ran his hands over his body, searching for the burgeoning lumps of tumours. Though he felt strong – incredible, in fact – right after the shot, he could feel his body weakening over the past few months. The drug would continue to degrade his muscles if he kept this up. Jayce had noticed that Viktor seemed to be slowing down around the lab, had already raised some concerns about his illness progressing.

Viktor rubbed his leg again. Jayce was bound to notice the injections. He'd have to come clean.

He *could* tell him everything.

Fear spasmed through him.

No.

No, he would have to tell him it was something else. Some quirky Zaunite remedy.

He couldn't tell him it was Shimmer. He couldn't tell any of them.

I should be stronger than this.

Guilt gripped him. Jayce would believe him and his lies. How could he not? He was a beautiful, trusting man. Viktor could easily deceive him.

Gods. He doesn't deserve this.

"Alright, V?" Jayce stood beside him, and rested a hand on his

shoulder. Viktor leaned his head into him.

He doesn't deserve me.

"Not much sleep?" Vi said with a smirk.

But last night he had chosen Jayce. He was in too deep now.

Viktor looked up, mustering a reply. "Jayce has quite the appetite."

Jayce huffed. "You were the one demanding one last round!"

Vi rolled her eyes. "Gods, and you two were insufferable *before* you realised you were in love. I'll leave you to it. Dinner tomorrow at the tree, okay? Try and put clothes on first."

"No promises," Jayce called.

Viktor breathed in Jayce's cinnamon scent as Vi walked out. He banished the lingering guilt in his stomach.

He would tell him it's a medicine. That wasn't a lie. Not exactly.

8

Jayce

Jayce's eyes widened as he bit into the head of the fish. "Viktor told me to try this one and—mm, Jericho—it's perfect."

Jericho grunted, and Jayce blushed. "I don't talk about him *all* the time."

The hulking creature gave a growling laugh. Then he nodded at something in the distance.

Jayce turned, mouth still full of food. He saw three figures wending through the crowd towards them. Vi's pink hair stood out as usual, but the other two were hooded, stepping cautiously. It had been too unsafe for Jayce to appear in Piltover and meet them himself.

"What did I tell you, cupcake?" he heard Vi say to one of them as they approached. "He's right here, safe and sound."

"*Jayce,"* Caitlyn gasped. He broke into a wide grin.

She rushed forward, and he swept her up into a hug. "It's so good to see you."

Caitlyn held him tight for a few moments. Then she jerked back.

"What the hell, Talis?" she snapped. "I hear absolutely nothing for a year, thinking you've pissed off into exile and forgotten all about your best friend. And then you send me some letter? Telling me you're here? In the *Undercity?*" She looked him up and down. "…dressed like that?"

He ran a hand through his shoulder-length curls. He wore a tight grey shirt, cropped, splattered with grease stains from the lab, and slim black pants. Strips of leather coiled around his limbs, including one strapped tightly around his knuckles like a boxer. He still wore Vander's brown coat, stained from decades of use. And there was his beard, of course.

Jayce looked like any other sump-rat, nothing like the Academy scholar who'd fallen into the Lanes a year ago. It felt like a lifetime away.

"I know. I'm sorry. I couldn't write to you, Cait, it was too risky."

"This is *not* what the Council meant by exile, Jayce."

"Indeed," said the third member of the party. "It wasn't."

She kept her grey hood up. Jayce could see small flashes of gold on her lips and cheek as she spoke. Through the shadow of the hood, those hazel eyes pierced him. Just as he remembered.

"Jayce Talis," she said slowly. "It was quite the surprise to hear from you, of course. Let alone receive a personal invitation, via Caitlyn Kiramman, to the Undercity of all places."

"I know. I'm sorry for this."

"I could easily hand you over to the Enforcers."

"How convenient that we've got an Enforcer handy," Vi grumbled, shooting Jayce a glare. She had not been a fan of this plan. But involving Cait was the only way Jayce could think of

to get to the councillor. Caitlyn just didn't have the political sway they were going to need.

"I know," he sighed. "I'm grateful you came anyway."

"What, exactly, lead you to believe that I would be open to hearing out some heretic scientist evading exile?"

His heart beat loudly in his chest. "Honestly? I'm not quite sure. Just a feeling, at my trial. The way you looked at me."

"A *feeling*?" she said, scathing.

"That you were more curious about my work than afraid."

She paused. "I was," she said finally. "I am."

"Good. Then I have more to tell you about it," he said. "But first, let's sit. Eat."

Caitlyn's lip curled as Jericho slammed his cleaver into a fish neck. "Honestly, Jayce, I'm sure there was somewhere safe in Piltover we could have met. Somewhere a bit…cleaner."

Vi rolled her eyes. "Topsiders. I'm starting to realise that you were one of the good ones, huh, buddy?" She slapped him on the back.

Caitlyn looked at him, at where Vi had touched him, shock in her bright blue eyes. *Were,* he thought to himself. *Not* are *one of the good ones.* It felt right.

Especially as he looked at Caitlyn more closely. She'd tried her best to dress 'for the Undercity'. But there, that bulge at her pocket. Her Enforcer badge. He was surprised at how much tension flooded through him at the thought. *What has she seen? What has she seen and walked past?*

Any kids, lying in the gutter of some fissure?

"Well, I have yet to sample the cuisine of the Undercity," the councillor said, nodding to Jericho. "A true oversight on my part. I'll take your best." She placed a few coins on the counter, far too much for the simple meal offered.

Jericho shrugged and swiped them off the counter and served each of them a bowl. Jayce and Vi attacked the meal with vigour. Caitlyn sniffed the food, then placed it back on the counter, untouched. The councillor picked up the pieces of fish with delicate fingers. Not a dribble of juice spilled down her hand. She finished every last piece.

"Reminds me of home," she said. Jayce looked at her curiously. But she just gazed back at him from under the hood, unreadable.

He turned to Vi. She squinted, and cocked her head at the councillor. *I say we go for it.*

He nodded minutely.

"So, what now?" Caitlyn asked.

Vi crossed her arms. "Unfortunately for you, cupcake, this is the end of the line."

Her mouth gaped open. "What? But— Jayce—"

He just shrugged. "This is as far as Enforcers go." Cait looked like she'd been slapped in the face.

"And where, exactly, am I going?" the councillor asked. She seemed simply amused at the turn of events.

"Can't tell you that yet," Jayce said.

Caitlyn scoffed. "I cannot let you take a councillor deep into the Undercity with no protection and no idea where she's going."

Vi crossed her arms. "Yeah, we're gonna kidnap her and turning her into a filthy, Shimmer-addicted little sump-rat." She rolled her eyes.

"I'll be fine, Kiramman," the councillor interjected.

Cait glared at him. "Fine, then. Take her to see your special, top-secret work."

"…and I'll stay with you to make sure you don't follow," said Vi.

"Wait, no!" Caitlyn cried, her plan foiled.

Vi shrugged. "It's alright cupcake, I'm a great babysitter."

"Don't call me that," she grumbled.

But Jayce knew her well. He caught her eye and raised an *I know she's your type* eyebrow. Caitlyn immediately blushed.

"I'm sorry," he said. "We can meet up soon, talk properly."

"Fine," she sulked. "You owe me a big one, Talis."

"I do." He pulled her in for a hug. As much as things had changed, he'd missed her.

"You're so different," she mumbled into his coat.

"I know."

"You're okay, though?"

He pulled away. "Despite it all…I'm wonderful, Cait."

She smiled. "Good. Then I'll almost forgive you for ditching me." He laughed.

"Well then, Mr Talis," said the councillor. "Consider me intrigued. Lead the way."

He flinched. "Please, it's Jayce. That name is behind me."

She inclined her head. "Very well."

He gave Caitlyn one last hug, and slapped Vi's back in farewell. Then he wended his way through the market with the councillor in tow.

* * *

"Quite the walk, then?"

"Yeah, most things are down here."

They had been walking for around thirty minutes now. The tall undercity building gave way to the narrow, rocky walls of

the fissures. Dark cave entrances opened every so often, though they walked past each one. He counted them in his head

"So, uh…" He scrambled for small talk. "Where's home? Not many places make someone nostalgic for raw fish heads."

She gave a light scoff. "As if you don't know."

"What?"

"You can drop the act now." Her voice was cold as ice.

"Wha— act?"

"Oh yes. My mother is tucked away in one of these caves, is she not?"

"Your *mother*?"

She sighed. "Committed, I see."

"I have no idea what you're on about."

"She truly expects me to believe that a disgraced scholar, exiled by the Council, invited a member *of the Council* – with which he has never spoken to directly – to see his illegal magic… based on a hunch?"

"Well, I—" He felt his cheeks grow pink. "Yeah! Because I did!"

"She usually has better taste in spies." The councillor shot him a pitying look. "Sorry. That may be harsh. You're clearly new."

Jayce started to laugh. He couldn't help it. "You have a pretty strange mother, if you think she'd pull something like this. I promise, I'm not a spy."

She frowned at him. "*Very* committed."

"If I show you real magic, will you believe that I'm genuine?"

She was quiet for a moment. "It would help," she said finally.

They walked on in silence.

* * *

Thirty, Jayce counted. And yes, there, a cluster of glowing purple flowers placed behind a boulder. He rolled his eyes. As if his partner couldn't trust him to count to *thirty* (though he had started to worry at cave twenty-four).

"Here," he said. He paused. "Um…I know you're Councillor Medarda…"

"Obviously," she said, amused. "I don't think you're *that* bad a spy."

"Yeah, right, spy," he said. "But…what's your name again?"

"Gods," she sighed. "She should pay you more just for your committment. It's Mel."

"Nice to meet you, Mel."

He couldn't see her expression as he led her into the cave. They turned a few corners, the walls calustrophobic.

The pair entered a large, rocky cavern. A natural dome stretched high above them. Glowing gemstones were embedded into the walls like stars, and thin glowing cables threaded them together like constellations. There was a large, round, metal platform in the centre, several meters across. Concentric rings were etched into it, glowing blue, as were the runes carefully carved into its surface.

Beside the platform, Viktor sat on a small stool in front of a panel with buttons, levers, and dials, all glowing softly. A child with tufty blue hair crouched beside him. He looked up at the sound of their footsteps.

"You made good time."

"She ate all the fish," Jayce said, shooting her a smirk.

Mel said nothing, walking slowly up to the platform. She

turned and scrutinised every inch of the gemstone net. In their blue light, Jayce could finally see her face, lit up beneath the hood. *She's just as beautiful as I remembered*. It was nice to see her mask fall a little, all that poise dropping away. Her soft lips had opened, and her eyes were wide in childlike wonder.

Viktor stood gracefully from the stool. He had chosen a thick purple dress today, wrapped around him, with one of his more ornate leg braces. Long hair was caught up in a half-bun, pinned in place with a curling piece of metal. Matching metal decoration wrapped around his forearms, his waist, and one collared his neck. Although the grey metal seemed a little tarnished besides Mel's bright gold, Viktor had soldered the pieces himself. No Zaunite would have it any other way.

Viktor raised one amused eyebrow at him. Jayce couldn't hold back an embarrassed grin, remembering his words from earlier that day as they planned this out with the crew. *You better not have just picked the prettiest one to help us.*

"Mel," Jayce said. "Welcome to Hextech."

She was silent for a moment, staring at the runes in the dais. Then she looked at him, a hard, searching look that made him feel like she'd peeled back his soul.

Finally, Mel reached up, and lowered her hood. Her hair had been draped elaborately over her head in the council room, but now it was wrapped into a simple knot at the base of her head. There was less gold on her face, although the specks on her cheeks and the bar on her lip remained.

"So you really aren't a Noxian spy."

"I promise, I have never met your mother."

She shuddered. "We're keeping it that way. But that means… you actually decided to show me your secret magic technology, because of…what, a kind look?"

Jayce looked down at his shoes. "Maybe. Yes."

Viktor chuckled. "You will find that Jayce is impressively…"

"Naïve?"

"…trusting. One of his best qualities." The councillor finally looked at Viktor properly. He raised his eyebrows, a light challenge. Jayce felt his cheeks go red, and he rested his hand on the small of Viktor's back.

Mel's eyes tracked the movement. "My apologies," she murmured. "It's…not a quality I'm accustomed to."

"I gathered that," Jayce said. "You do know that most people aren't spies?"

She shot him an amused look, and stepped forwards, holding out a slim hand to Viktor. "My name is Mel. I usually have better manners."

"This is Viktor, my partner," Jayce said. Pride burned in his chest.

Viktor looked at her hand for a long moment before taking it. "Welcome to magic, councillor."

"So in just a year, you took a few hairbrained notes and an accidental explosion and turned it into…this?" she asked, taking in the crystals once again.

"I had help," Jayce said, thumb smoothing over Viktor's waist.

"From your partner?"

"From the people of Zaun," Viktor said, standing straighter. His golden, black-edged eyes shined.

Mel frowned. "And what is Zaun?"

"A new state," Viktor said. "For the people of the Undercity. With Hextech, we will have our independence from your Council."

Shock flashed through her eyes. "Jayce, I didn't expect you to throw me in with some…fringe radicals."

Jayce snorted. Before he could reply, Viktor stepped forwards, drawing her gaze.

"These *fringe radicals* have their hands on technology that Piltover can only dream of. We have been using it to usurp trade for months now."

She frowned, crossing her arms. "Prove it."

His lips quirked. "With pleasure."

Viktor looked towards the young child, amber eyes wide and eager. At his nod, she bounded up to the centre of the dais. She placed a small gear with a splatter of Firelight green paint there, before dashing over to the panel.

Jayce twitched as Isha ran her fingers over the runes. He, personally, thought that small children should maybe be kept away from the *mysterious arcane*, especially after seeing the aftermath of his lab explosion first-hand. But Isha was always in and out of the lab with Jinx and Ekko. She had a knack for inventions that apparently rivalled Viktor's at that age. When they had tried to keep her away, she had taken to stealing gemstones until they relented. She knew the workings of Hextech better than most of the adult Zaunites who helped them.

Isha frowned at the clunky buttons, then looked up at Viktor with concern. He stood over her. "Yes, that's the one," he murmured. She pressed it, and rested her fingers on a dial, looking up again. He gave an encouraging nod. She tweaked a few more things, checking with him each time.

"Let's crank it," he said with a smile, and she bounced happily. Her small fist slammed down on the large button in the centre.

The rings of the platform began to glow, and blue Hextech light shimmered through them. Mel's eyes were wide as saucers. The crystals in the walls all lit up, magic flowing through

the leads. The light circled the room. There was a loud, percussive boom. Jayce knew to close his eyes just before the gear disappeared with a flash of light.

"Gods," Mel murmured. She went to step onto the empty platform.

"Oh— not yet!" Jayce said, gripping her upper arm. The muscles under his hand were surprisingly pronounced. She pulled away from him sharply.

"That is not advised, Councillor," Viktor said wryly. "Not unless you would like to be eviscerated by the arcane."

"Let us avoid that, please." Her voice trembled slightly. "Where has it gone?"

"To the paired gate," said Viktor. "Far away."

"*Where*, precisely?"

He just gave an elusive smile. She frowned.

"So you made a tiny object disappear. I mean…it's not *un*impressive but I hardly see how—"

She broke off as the rings began to glow again. The crystals on the walls glimmered in slow waves, faster and faster. They shielded their eyes as another percussive boom shook the chamber.

In the centre of the platform, several crates had appeared. A few held bottles of deep red and amber liquid. Another was piled high with strange, metal contraptions. Isha ran up to it with a gasp and began pawing through. And, as they had requested from their contact, one crate held something which set Jayce's teeth on edge.

"Snow," Mel breathed.

"Yes. I have never seen it myself," said Viktor, approaching it curiously.

"Can I…" She shot a questioning look at Jayce.

"Yes, the transfer is complete."

She approached the dais and looked over the goods, inspecting each carefully.

"You just transported this *hundreds* of miles, in the blink of an eye."

"Yes," Viktor said.

"Does it take people?"

He just shrugged. (They hadn't yet tested that. No one was willing to subject themselves to the raw energy of the arcane, not until Viktor and Jayce were more confident that they wouldn't dissolve across the cosmos. And there were plenty of other projects taking their attention.)

"How much can it transport?"

Viktor gave a cryptic smile.

The councillor looked up at the crystal sky.

"What else can these crystals be used for? You blew up your whole lab, Jayce. Is the Undercity preparing weapons?"

Viktor just cocked his head. Jayce tried not to look at her directly. He knew how easily his face gave things away.

Mel glowered at them both. "I see." She tapped a bottle. "This is Salo's favourite pinot. And just as his collection has all been tragically destroyed in a vicious attack by the Undercity. The next shipment won't arrive for months. I take it he's about to find a handy merchant who just happens to have a few bottles lying around?"

Viktor said nothing, a spark in his eyes.

"So, with this, you have an impressive trade advantage, access to funds, and the means to make powerful and unprecedented weaponry." A disturbed look took over her face. "In other words, you hold the victory for your civil war."

Viktor folded his arms. "I like her," he said to Jayce.

"I told you she'd get it," he replied.

"I'm not sure I'd go that far," she said curtly. "War in this city would be…"

"Long overdue," Jayce snapped.

"…a tragedy," Mel finished. Her hazel eyes were sharp.

"The Undercity needs justice!"

"Has the Undercity not bled enough? And what happens when you and your *justice* burns Piltover to the ground with your weapons?"

"Annihilation is the Piltover way," Viktor said. "That is not our goal."

"You just burnt down a councillor's mansion!"

"A building." Viktor waved his hand. "We do not want to see all Piltover destroyed."

"An Enforcer died."

Viktor's eyes went cold. "Then I guess the Lanes are a little safer."

Mel's mouth dropped open. She shook her head. "You have no idea what you are unleashing. To risk the brutality of war—"

"We suffer *brutality* every day, Councillor," Viktor snapped. "The brutality of dying from toxins that your delicate nose has never touched before. You're so concerned with the bloodlust of the Undercity? You have no idea what true bloodlust is until you have lived under their rule. It is *because* Piltover deals only with blood that we are forced to meet violence with violence."

"You know nothing of war," she insisted. "All sides will suffer if—"

"There already *is* a war." Viktor's eyes burned. "It just doesn't look like the neat battlefields from your gilded history texts. But so far, we've been the only ones *dying*."

Mel was quiet for a long moment. "There are other ways than

violence."

"There are," Jayce said. "It's why you're here. "

Anger lingered in Viktor's eyes. "Believe me, I do not take bloodshed lightly either. But our people *will* be free."

She was quiet for a moment, taking in the slim Zaunite. "You do not seek annihilation?"

"We do not want to rule over a city of ashes. We want to break the cycle of domination, not continue it."

"Hmm," she said softly. She gazed at the crystals for a while.

"How do you know of war?" Jayce asked eventually.

Mel looked at him, something guarded in her eyes. Then the wall fell.

"Noxus is very good at war. Especially domination." She nodded to Viktor. "Which is why I am here in Piltover, not there. I would like to break that cycle."

Viktor cocked his head. "You did seem strangely confident to be led into a dark fissure alone with no guards and no Enforcers. I imagine you could handle yourself quite easily in a fight."

She gave them a cryptic smile of her own. "Gods, this is refreshing," she said finally.

"It is?" said Jayce.

"Yes. Piltovian politicians are rather…dull. So many squabbles. This is far more engaging."

"We are no politicians," Viktor scoffed.

"Jayce may not be, no." She raised her eyebrows at Viktor. He looked affronted, but Jayce just smiled to himself.

"I'm going to choose not to be offended by that," Jayce said.

"Good. It was not meant as such," Mel said. She crossed her arms. "Now, what do you want from me?"

"A line of communication with the Council," said Viktor. "Tell them your spies have discovered that the Undercity has

wondrous new technology, and are using it to trade without Piltover." A grin spread over his face. "We're ready to scare them."

"But," Jayce added. "Hopefully, more than that. Not just trading favours, an ally. It's why we brought you here. To show you what Zaun could be."

She gave a wry smile.

"Trusting, remember?" Viktor said. His golden eyes were warm as they met Jayce's.

"Refreshing," she echoed. "I want unrestricted access to the gates myself. To transport anything I wish."

"Done. I can bring you here whenever you want," Jayce said.

"Not willing to allow me here without supervision?"

"Well, unless you have a knack for the sciences, you'll need someone to operate the gates," said Viktor. "But we really would like an ally, and that comes with trust."

She looked at the Hexgate for a long, long moment, a small crease between her slim brows. The blue lights glinted off her golden lip and freckles.

"You'll tear each other apart, won't you?" she said finally.

"Piltover would kill every last Zaunite rather than see us free," Viktor corrected her, an edge to his voice. "Unless properly handled."

She gave a deep sigh. "Well, I can help with handling."

"And…you will?" Jayce said hopefully.

She looked at him, her eyes warm. With the hood lowered, he could see a lovely ring of green around her pupils.

"Yes, Jayce. You deduced well. My heart is softer than it looks."

Viktor crossed his arms. "Or, you have just been offered a piece of powerful new technology, and know how to pick the

winning side."

She shrugged. "Well, I'll still help you. Though I hope your faith in your comrades is as well-placed as your faith in me," she said, an edge to her voice. "Revolutions can be quite tempting for the right opportunitist." Viktor said nothing.

She stood beside the crate of snow, crumbling a piece in her finger. Her face grew wistful.

"Alright, Jayce. Time for me to return to the council that you undoubtedly would like to tear down."

Jayce snorted, and Viktor shrugged. "Just kneecap, for now."

* * *

Viktor

Jayce left, hovering close to the graceful Medarda as he led her from the cave. Viktor smiled to himself. *That man.* He was almost annoyed that he'd been right.

He looked at Isha, still crouched by the control panel. "What do you think?"

She shrugged. With the press of a button, the panel folded in on itself, compacting into a small piece of metal the size of a sheet of paper. She handed it to him. Then her hands flickered in the air as she signed.

He snorted. "Yes, you calibrated it well. I did mean about the councillor, though."

She shrugged again, disinterest clear on her face. It made him smile. "Hopefully Councillor Medarda doesn't insist on using the gate too much, and we don't have to go through the set up here very often. We need her to think it's permanent."

Isha signed to him with a confused frown.

"In case she tries to seize it for herself."

She signed back.

"Well, trust is a strange thing, little bug." He smiled fondly. "But we don't need you to help every time. I'm sure one of the Firelights could do the wall-clambering part—" She cut him off, stomping her foot. He chuckled. "It might not be as precise as your set-up, but they're not idiots—" She rolled her eyes, and he laughed.

Isha bounced onto her feet, and ran to the cave wall. She collected the gems stone by stone, starting to climb up the walls. Viktor watched anxiously. But Isha was the best climber he knew, each footing sure.

He walked to the dais, pressing a small button, and it too began to collapse in one itself. It slotted together neatly with the control panel. Once Isha had pulled down the crystals and their leads, she poured the gems into a compartment, sliding it shut. Within a few minutes, the entire Hexgate had compacted down into a metal cube about the length of Viktor's forearm. He pressed a button on its surface, and one of Ekko's deweighter discs glowed into life. Even though Jayce, Vi, or some of the stronger Firelights could carry the thing themselves, Viktor had swiftly installed this feature for ease of use. He grasped the lead.

"Got everything?" he asked Isha. She took his free hand, and gave a happy nod. "Thank you for your assistance," he said softly. She just tugged him along to the tunnel. He followed, pulling the Hexgate along.

They stepped out into the fissure. The night air was chilly on his skin. "You know, Ekko found a new cave to set up the Gate in. One much closer to the city, which would be good to add

to our rotation. And Silco wants to try setting it up in one of his warehouses for some transfers, so he doesn't have to bother carrying things from out here. Vi's almost comfortable with the idea. I believe we're calibrating it well enough these days that the safety concerns are not too…"

She nodded, half-listening. Slowly, Viktor and the girl and the floating metal cube made their way back home to Zaun.

9

Ekko

Ekko zoomed through the wastewater tunnel, the buzz of their hoverboards filling the space as Scar followed close behind. Ekko swayed to avoid a stuck-out pipe, then ducked under a tree root that had breached the roof, a familiar dance. He knew these tunnels like the back of his hand. He groaned as he shifted his weight, feeling the ache of a long day in his bones.

The end of the tunnel loomed ahead, and he crouched with a grin, accelerating. He broke out into the night air. The Firelight home spread out below him, glowing warm with a few campfires and strings of light. Ekko was amazed to see how many people were here tonight. Some clustered around the kitchen area, helping with the evening meal. He could see Vi leading a sparring group as a few pairs grappled with each other. People wandered around the platforms that surrounded the tree trunk, chatting and laughing softly.

He flew around the upper branches and let his fingertips trail

through the leaves. There were a few other Firelights in the branches with him; a nervous teenager wobbled on a board nearby. They almost crashed into the trunk, and their friend dashed after them, laughing.

Ekko shook his head with a smile. He remembered when the tree was just a slender sapling, barely taller than he was. Scar had crashed Ekko's first hoverboard prototype into that patch of wall just over there. Now, the spot was covered with a mural of flowers. Not his, one done by some of the younger children who lived here. A few kids were gathered there now, fighting over paints. He flew around again for another look. Actually, it was more than a few kids, more like a few dozen. *More than I've seen before.*

As much as the sight brought a smile to his face, fear twisted in his gut. When the tree was small, it had been just him, and Scar, and a few others. All they were doing was trying to keep a damn tree alive with Ekko's janky chem-filters. Now, dozens and dozens of people were living full-time at the Firelight home. Not to mention the hundreds who flowed through here daily, getting a meal, or a medical look-over from Singed, or a spare part fixed up.

They all relied on the Firelights to look after them and keep them safe. *Rely on me.*

Ekko descended in slow rings, trying to shake off his turn in mood. He'd timed the arrival well, and people were just beginning to line up with bowls for dinner. An unexpected smell hit his nose, then he smiled at the sight of Jayce standing over the giant pot. He'd forgotten that Jayce had offered to cook one of his favourite meals from home tonight. *We're gonna need more pots soon, and big ones,* he thought, as he watched the line grow longer and longer. *Maybe me and Jinx should knock together*

a new stove, too. He added it to his mental list, frowning as he remembered he'd already said he'd go out on Piltie Patrol again tomorrow night.

On Piltie Patrol, Firelights or Vi's crew or anyone else who capabale went out into the Lanes and kept an eye out for Enforcers causing trouble. Sometimes they just stood and watched, which often kept them on good behaviour. Sometimes they escorted someone home, just in case. Sometimes, they had to do more.

He hopped off the hoverboard, landing with a groan as his joints protested. Ekko headed for the kitchen as he slung the board onto his back. He could see Jayce, towering over most of them. He was ladling something hot and delicious-looking into the passing bowls in a worn-out pink apron. *Where did he even dig that thing up from?*

There was a lovely, attentive look on Jayce's face as he listened to an old lady chatting to him, holding up the line. He saw Ekko and waved enthusiastically. Ekko couldn't not smile back. He headed towards the back of the line, already tired at the idea of standing for so long to wait, the hoverboard heavy on his back.

"Little man! Get over here!" he heard a shout. Vi waved from a campfire beside the tree trunk, holding up a bowl. Gratitude welled in his chest.

He made his way across to the group huddled round the fire. Jinx was curled up against a giant tree root, tinkering with something. She glanced up and pulled a face at him, then immediately absorbed herself in her project again. He knew from the look in her eyes that it wasn't a great day. Some days she was distant from them all, drawn into her own world. She wouldn't speak much except to sign things like "I'm fine. Please go away." Usually after a couple of days and plenty of

space, she pulled through it. He was glad to see that someone – presumably Vi – had put a bowl of food within reach. Isha was curled up against the tree too, fast asleep under a blanket. Gert sat on a low stool, plucking at a guitar. She hummed along with the music.

Vi stood and slapped his shoulder. "Good patrol, bud?" She handed him the bowl.

He shrugged. "Scar did most of the work." Residual adrenaline flared as he remembered the Enforcers. The flash of their weapons as they turned at the buzz of the hoverboards. He'd ducked their shots, just like he did every time.

So far.

And Jinx's stun bombs worked like a charm, like they did every time.

So far.

His hands trembled as he took the bowl.

"Sit down, would you?" Vi said. Her voice was soft, but the grip on his elbow wasn't.

He sat cross-legged. The first spoonful of the brown, stewy, slightly sweet something hit him like a warm hug. He moaned a little, closing his eyes. *That fire is so nice.*

Vi and Gert chatted softly about nothing much. Ekko felt his body relax muscle by muscle, the aftermath of the adrenaline sinking in.

"You all mind?" someone asked gruffly.

He opened his eyes to see Sevika standing by the circle. She'd left her arm off today. She held a bowl awkwardly, not looking at any of them.

"Yeah, of course," Vi said. "I'm glad you came."

She sank down onto a stool next to Gert, and shrugged. "Well, you're a real nagger, Vi."

Gert laughed. "She's relentless."

"Someone's gotta herd you cats!" Vi gave Sevika a look. "Are we on for tomorrow?"

Sevika raised an eyebrow. "You ready for it? The miners are tough as nails, Vi, and more stubbon than a suckerbug. They make Silco look like a push-over."

"It's a solid idea. How can they not go for it?"

"Well, my old man thinks this Zaun thing is a crock of shit, and we're all soft-bellied little kids."

"He thinks *you're* soft?" Ekko muttered. He froze as Sevika threw him a searing glare.

"He thinks anyone who doesn't breathe in chem-dust 20 hours a day is soft." She shrugged. "He's not exactly wrong."

"I mean, he's a *bit* wrong,c Gert said. She blushed as Sevika smirked at her.

"They've got to listen," Vi frowned. "If this works, it's gonna be huge."

"Vi, it'll be fine," Ekko said. "You've been pushing damn hard lately. If you want, I could help, I could go—"

"Shut up, Ekko. I'm about to tie you to the tree to make you rest."

Jinx glanced up from her corner and signed quickly. *Shut up Ekko.* He rolled his eyes at her.

"He signed up for Piltie Patrol tomorrow," said Gert.

"Ekko!" Vi snapped.

He glared at Gert, and she just shrugged. "You did, dude, and it's dumb as shit. You go out like every night."

"I've got a whole bunch of new guys who are probably ready for it!" Vi said. "Let one of them go out with a Firelight, Scar can show them the ropes."

"I—" Ekko sat still, words trailing away. He *had* managed to

steal some lovely paints from some councillor last week. He hadn't had a chance to sit down with them yet. He felt the fatigue into his bones.

Maybe that's a good idea.

Before he could say anything, someone yelled out "Ekko!" A gangly boy with messy, ginger hair dashed across the grass towards him. His mother followed a few steps behind. She was tall, and the green tubes stemming from her ruined nose glowed in the night. She looked bemused.

"Hey, Raylen," he said to the boy with a grin.

"Ekkooo! I made something, wanna see!?"

"Yeah, kiddo, show me."

Raylen crouched on the ground beside him and opened a battered sketchbook, flipping through. His mother approached the circle cautiously. Sevika looked up, and a steely look crossed her face.

"Renni," she greeted her.

"Sevika," she replied, equally cold. They all watched, tense.

Renni turned. "Ekko, I'm just going to…well…do you think you could keep an eye on him for an hour or two?"

"Of course. I'll send him over to the usual spot."

She nodded gratefully. The lines in her face looked deeper in the light of the fire.

"Ekko! I drew a Firelight!" the boy said, poking his knee.

"Like a me or like a bug?" he said with a grin, tilting his head to look at the sketch.

Raylen giggled. "The bug. People are hard— Bye Ma— but look, I didn't know they had extra eyes! I was looking reeeally close at one before with Isha, we snuck up on it!"

Renni shook her head with a smile, then turned and headed to the other side of the commune. She would go through a

doorway there, up a few flights of stairs, to a room where Singed was trying out a milder form of Shimmer. More and more people were coming through these days, staying at the Firelight home for a couple of hours, trying to wean off the harder street drug.

Sevika watched her go, then looked at the boy. Her grey eyes were deep and thoughtful.

Raylen chatted to Ekko non-stop, showing him every sketch in the book, including ones he'd forgotten he'd already shown him. Ekko listened, complimenting things here and there. He could feel his mind finally begin to unwind, letting go of the heaviness of the day's work just as his body was.

After a while, Raylen spotted a friend of his at the kid's mural. He ran across with barely a "bye!" back at Ekko. Something twisted in his chest as Ekko watched them crouch together, yelling excitedly about what they'd painted.

We never had that.

Sure, he and Vi and Jinx had scrapped around and played at that age. But it had been punching, shooting stuff, play-fighting. *Always fighting.*

"Kids," Sevika muttered, raising an eyebrow at Vi. "Big ones n' small ones. Annoying little fuckers."

"I…" Ekko rubbed a hand over the short hairs at the back of his head. "Um, I…" He looked down, feeling heat creep up his neck. "Fuck."

"You alright, little man?" Vi said.

He sighed shakily. "Yeah, just give me a tick. This isn't gonna be easy." He looked up. Jinx was still curled against the tree, not moving a muscle. But while her hands were still, her pink eyes watched him closely. She gave the tiniest nod.

"That's okay," Vi said quietly. She slid off the stool and knelt

beside him. She squeezed his knee, and he grabbed blindly for her hand, the other covering his face. The words felt like they were crawling up his throat, then got stuck. He couldn't say them, but he couldn't swallow them either. He couldn't hold it back anymore.

I don't want to hold it back.

"I…don't think I want to go back out there." It came out as a broken whisper. He felt something crack inside him.

Vi's hand was like a vice on his, holding him tight. "Okay," she whispered.

"Okay?" he gasped.

"Yeah, buddy. Of course it's okay."

"Okay."

"Okay."

"Okay," he said. He looked at Jinx though his finger. She flickered a sign. *O. K.* The corner of her mouth twitched.

"It's just— it's just the fighting. That, that—" He tried to gesture over his stomach, trying to articulate—

"The fear?" Gert said. She had not stopped plucking at the guitar, but the sound was soothing. "Yeah, the blue-belly fuckers are no joke. You don't have to be up for it."

"How come *you're* all up for it?"

Gert shrugged. "Dunno. Maybe I won't be forever. But, for now, we are. And we got this." Her eyes were gentle over the fire.

He nodded shakily. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

"Shut up, Ekko," Vi murmured, squeezing his fingers. "It's okay."

"I can still do— stuff. Sussing places out. Stealing shit, I think? It's just the *fighting—*"

"Yeah, of course. Let's figure it out sometime. But y'know,

there's a bunch to do around here. You can do food runs on your board and stuff." Vi's voice was deep and soothing.

"Okay."

"Just paint shit for a few days, okay?"

"Okay." He chuckled weakly.

"Okay."

Jinx was still watching him. She signed to him.

I love you.

He sighed, and signed back. *I love you too.* She stuck out her tongue, just a little. His heart pressed against his chest as he looked at her.

With a sigh, Sevika settled back on the stool. "Well, I'll say one thing. There's nothing soft-bellied about that."

They sat for a long time. Gert's quiet strumming filled the air. Ekko took deep breaths, eyes resting closed. *I did it. I finally did it. And it was okay.* He knew it would be, knew that Vi and Jinx would get it and love him still

Footsteps approached, and he looked up to see Jayce walking towards them.

"Hey, guys," he said. Though his smile was bright as ever, he pulled his apron off with a groan. "That was harder than it looks." He slumped to the ground, and dug into his bowl with gusto.

"It's great, jawline," said Gert.

"Really good," Vi agreed.

"What the hell was it?" Sevika asked.

"Mole. My mother made it all the time." He looked down. "It was a bit strange with crabcraw meat, though."

"Try shimmerbug next time," Sevika offered. "It's got a kick that might work."

"Gods, I haven't had shimmerbug in a while," Gert said. "Da

used to bring home little sweetened ones when I was a kid."

"You lot ever have it pickled in chem-juice?" Sevika grunted.

"In *chem-juice?"*

"Yeah, old miner's recipe. It's good to keep a jar handy while working in the fissures. Smells like gasoline and tastes worse, you gotta build up the tolerance for it." She shrugged. "Does grow on you, though."

"Gods, sometimes I forget how bad it can be down here," Jayce murmured.

Sevika smirked. "It's alright, Piltie. So do these little upstarts." She winked at Gert, whose fingers slipped on the guitar strings.

"We've *got* to start talking to the miners," Vi muttered. "Tomorrow's gonna be good,"

Sevika nodded slowly. "I think you'll be just fine." Her eyes were soft, and the warm fire turned them from grey to silver.

After a while, she looked at Gert. "Do you know this one?" She began to hum quietly, a little tuneless.

Gert listened closely. "I don't think so," she said with a frown.

Vi sat up. "Wait, yeah."

Jinx's hands moved in the shadow. The sign for *mother.*

"What is that?"

"An old Janna lullaby," said Sevika.

"Sing it again," Gert said. Sevika hummed again, and she began to pluck along after a few rounds. She pulled out the melody, then began to sing. Their voices melded together in the fire's light.

Ekko closed his eyes as he listened. *Tomorrow, gotta get up and—*

Wait, no. No patrolling. Vi was benching him.

Relief flooded through him. There was a patch of wall near the Last Drop he'd been thinking of redecorating for a while…

He let his mind drift along with the lullaby, as the ache in his bones started to ease.

10

Vi

The big man reached into the jar, taking a handful of shimmerbug and crunching down.

"Zaun," he snorted. "Never liked the name." The woman next to him snickered.

Vi tried not to breath too deeply, stifling the urge to cough. She thought she was used to the acrid tinge of gases from her life in the Lanes, but the smog down in the mines was so much heavier. She could feel the burn in her lungs. But Sevika had refused the filters that Viktor offered them. *"They'll never listen if we look like Pilties."*

"It's not changing, Pa." Sevika said to the man. Her fingers tapped rapidly on her elbow. Vi hadn't seen this nervous energy in her before.

"No? If you want us to stick our necks out for your little rebellion, maybe we should get a say." The man was tall, built like a boulder, and with a grey tinge to his skin that reminded Vi

of her father. The look of someone who rarely left the fissures.

Sevika sighed. "You do get a say. On shit that matters."

"Names matter."

"Pa, come on."

Bool snorted. "Fine. Let me see those things again." He squinted at Vi.

They stood in a large, underground cavern, beside a shallow crater in the ground several hundred meters wide. Workers were digging deep into its walls. Each had a small, green chem-light to search for minerals, but the cavern was otherwise dark. She shivered as a drop of water hit her neck and made its way under her collar, feeling a light burn on her skin in its path from the acid.

Vi squeezed her hand into a fist. The Hextech gauntlet hissed. They glowed in the gloomy air, giving the gloves a halo of blue.

Bool raised his eyebrows. "Very pretty. And you think it's worth bringing the bosses down on us for a couple of metal gloves?"

"It's not just these," said Sevika. "We have more. And we have scientists. You tell us what you want to help you mine better, we'll make them. You'll be able to get ten times as much out of the ground, and do it safer."

"For nothin'?"

"For the minerals," said Vi. "We'll buy them from you, cuz we have some…unique ways to sell them on. Or if you want to sell it yourself, we'll help you do it. But at the end of the day, tell the Pilties you're keeping it, and cut them out completely." She clenched her fist. "If we're the ones pulling the shit from the ground, we should get to see the goddamn coin."

The woman barked a laugh. "You done any *pulling out of the ground* yourself, kid? You and Vander, thinkin' you know

what's best for us. Let me ask you, let's say we ignore the quota. Tell the boss they can go shove nothin' up their asses because we're keeping their rocks, and we work with you instead." She crossed her arms, an augmented metal hand glowing green. "Then where do we sleep? Piltover gives us a bed and slops for the day's work. They own all of it. We an' our families would be out sleeping in the fissures themselves."

"We have beds, the Firelights—"

"Oh, come on." Bool rolled his eyes. "What, thousands of beds?"

Anger rose in Vi's chest. "Fine. What are they gonna do if you *all* refuse to give up the minerals? Kick all of you out? There's too many. And we'll stop them, we'll fight with you."

"With those?" He shot a condescending look at the gauntlets, then at Sevika. "You. You've been up there too long. It softened you, like I said it would. Forgot what it's like down here."

"Sorry I didn't feel like dying under a boulder, Pa," she snapped.

"You *ran,"* he snarled. "And for Silco's bullshit, of all things. But this lot are even more rock-headed." His gaze turned sly. "You know, he sent someone to us the other day. Silco. Saying similar stuff. Told us he could sell the rocks for us on the side, he had some new line of trade. Nothing about all of this fighting and up-starting."

Sevika shot Vi a look. *Fuck*. Her anger flared. Silco was trying to cut them out, using the Hexgates to keep up business while hanging them out to dry. The wormy little—

"Guess you're not all as close as you're tryna look," Bool said smugly.

"No, we're not close. We're not all friends. But we don't have to be to need each other." Sevika glared at him. "You and I know

plenty about that, huh?" Bool returned her hard stare with an unreadable look in his eyes.

"Why sell the rocks to you, not Silco?" the woman asked with a frown.

"Did he offer you Hextech?" Vi said. "We can make mining easier and safer. We can clean the air down here. Did he offer to fight alongside you?" She raised her eyebrows. "Did he even bother to come down here and meet with you himself? Or did he send some messenger."

The two exchanged a look.

"The chem-barons just want to get rich," said Vi. "But we were serious about the beds we have, and with your help, we can give everyone in this city a proper place to sleep. With the coin from the minerals, we're gonna feed people. And…we'll prepare. When they come for us all, we're going to fight. The Enforcers won't step foot in Zaun again. Maybe when the time comes, you'll help us."

"So those are the strings." Bool crossed his massive arms.

"It's an offer, Pa," said Sevika with a sigh. "I came to you because even though you're an *ass*—" He snorted. "—you're a man of your word. So if you take our tech and agree to trade together, we're hoping you'll follow through when we need you. When we need each other."

The woman shifted on her feet, looking unsure.

But Bool gave a bitter laugh. "I'm done listening to a bunch of kids who've never touched a rock in their life. You're telling us to put *ourselves* at risk for this little dream? You don't have the guts to punch a boulder, let alone go up against topside and win. You'll get us all killed." He threw a glare at Sevika, and turned away.

Vi's fists wound tighter. The gauntlets responded, hissing

and throwing off a blue glow that spread through the chem-fog.

"You think we're soft?" she growled. "You're right, I haven't worked in your mines. And I can't fucking *breathe* down here." She drew in a lungful of air anyway, feeling the burn. It just spurred her on. "But I've been in Stillwater. They worked me to the bone and kicked my ribs in for the trouble, every day." The woman looked her over, raising her eyebrows. "And my father worked these mines. It wasn't the gases, or falling rocks, that killed him. It was Enforcers."

"That was Vander's fault—"

"*Vander* is gone, and you still live this way!" Vi's voice was loud now as she cut him off, carrying to some of the workers in the crater. They slowed their work. "Under the threat of Piltover, in rock-hard beds that you don't even own, eating whatever slops they can be bothered throwing at you. I'm tired of it, Bool, aren't you?"

She saw Bool start to shake his head.

"You think *I'm* the coward?" Sevika snapped. "At least I'm trying to change this shit."

"I think you're *pathetic*." His words whipped between them.

Vi patience snapped. *I'm sick of talking.*

"Fine. Sevika?" Sevika shot a look at her, anger boiling in her eyes. "He's not going to listen? He thinks we can't take on the Enforcers with these *little gloves?*"

A smile curled her lip. Sevika rolled her shoulders back, and her cape dropped to the ground. Her left arm began to glow, a new one the crew had been tinkering with for months now. Blue Hextech gems melded with veins of green chem and purple Shimmer.

"I won't lie." She cocked an eyebrow at Vi. "I've been wanting to do this for a while. Nothing personal."

"You're not the only one," she grinned. Vi turned to the crater and the workers there, half of whom were already watching.

She curled her hand into a fist, and slammed it down into the rock below. The echoing crash left quiet in its wake as the workers stopped to look.

She sucked in a lung of chem-fog, and yelled as loud as she could. "You spend your lives digging down here in the dark, because of the shiny Piltie boot on *all* our necks! Why the *fuck* do they get the rock that you pull out of the ground with your own *bare hands*?" She panted. "But we're gonna fight for fucking Zaun."

That was all the *speeching* she had in her, she decided.

Vi punched the ground again. "Clear out! I promise, we'll make it worth your while." With a few sceptical looks, a few workers began climbing slowly out of the crater.

She turned back to Sevika. "Don't you dare go easy on me."

"No promises," she smirked.

"With Bool watching? I have a feeling you're gonna be showing off."

Real anger flashed across Sevika's face. She pressed something on the arm. Shimmer flowed through its tubes, then seamlessly into Sevika's veins, that purple glow spreading out under the skin. Her eyes turned rabid.

"Shut the fuck up, Vi."

"That's more like it," she grinned.

Sevika didn't waste another second. Her left fist swung for Vi's face.

They sparred, throwing wide, flashy shots, easy to block with big flashes of light. Vi was giving the workers time to climb up to the side, and a bit of a show while they did it.

Vi's lungs felt like they'd caught fire. From how Sevika was

beginning to gasp, she knew this fight would be a short one.

Sevika's punches were erratic, driven by Shimmer. Vi lead her around easily, letting her overextend herself so that the arm trailed through the murky air in her wide swings, blue and green and purple. She almost got distracted herself at how good it looked in the fog.

Sevika's forearm slammed into Vi's throat out of nowhere, pushing her to the ground. *Oh, shit, she's really pushing.* And she saw Sevika's eyes flicker to her father, filled with Shimmer-driven rage.

Vi wriggled out of her grip, slamming her into the ground with the full force of the gloves before dodging away. *Fine. No holding back.*

She ran down into the crater, and Sevika leapt after her.

They grappled properly now. Their fists pummelled, missing as often as they landed, slamming into the crater walls. Vi forgot all about showing off the capabilities of the gauntlets as Sevika landed a nasty stomach blow, throwing her clear across the space.

Dust billowed around her. Vi gave a deep rib-rattling cough, and heard Sevika coughing too. The airborne acids crawled down her raw throat. *That little shit.*

Vi staggered to her feet. She fired up the gloves, and its little jets pushed her airborne. She zoomed across the murky space towards the glow of Sevika's arm, feet-fist, and landed square in her chest.

They crashed hard into the wall. Rocks tumbled down into the bottom of the crater.

Sevika stood, shaking it off. A savage grin spread over her face. She held her left hand up, palm towards Vi. *What is she—*

A pulse of Hextech blue light shot out and hit Vi in the chest.

She was flung back, weightless within a blue orb of light. Vi hovered in the air, wriggling wildly. But she couldn't move.

How nostalgic. She grinned, remembering this feeling from a year ago, when they first unlocked Hextech. The workers cried out below her at the sight.

Sevika stood with her guard up, ready.

Sure enough, after a moment of confusion, Vi cleared her head and fired up the gloves. She flew towards her, fists first.

But Sevika just shoved her to the side with a glowing blue hand, and Vi ended up knuckles-deep in the wall.

Frustrated, Vi dug her hands deep into the rock. She pulled up a boulder about double the size of Bool. She paused for a moment, looking across at the workers. They were all clustered around one edge, yelling them on. *Shouldn't hit them.*

She hurled it towards Sevika.

With a yell, Sevika met the boulder fist-first with a flash of purple. It shattered around her, though she staggered at the impact, dropping to one knee.

"Shit," Vi hissed. She dashed over. "Veek—"

The upper cut hit her jaw like a train as Sevika surged upwards.

The world went black.

She came to coughing wildly, flat on her back. Sevika was bent over beside her with hands on her knees, coughing up a lung.

"Can someone get these idiots some filters?" she heard someone yell.

"We were supposed to *show off* the Hex-gloves," Vi said weakly. "They're not very impressive if they lose."

"Shouldn't've lost then, dumbass," Sevika growled. "We're showing off Hextech."

"You better not have broken my jaw with that monster arm. And what the hell did it do earlier to make me float?"

"Ask your sister. She called it an, *enemy float-away-erer?*"

That dick. "That was my idea. Why didn't she give it to me?"

Sevika shot her a bloody grin. "And that last punch was with my right."

Vi started to laugh. She groaned as she rolled over.

"Idiots," said the woman, sliding down into the crater beside them. "Did that help your pride?"

Vi staggered to her feet. "It did, actually. But more importantly, it helped your quota." She nodded towards the centre of the crater.

Large chunks of rock had been torn loose in the course of the fight, rolling to the bottom, enough for several days' work.

"Come on." Vi slapped Sevika on the back with the gauntlet, hard enough to get a groan from her. Just a bit of payback for putting her flat on her back – with her normal arm, no less. *I'm never living that down*. "We'll break it down for you with the Hex-gloves. Take the rest of the day off."

The woman handed them gas filters. Vi and Sevika both grabbed for them and sucked in deep lungfuls of stale, soothing air. Sevika's eyes darted to the edge of the crater, looking for…

"He left," the miner said. "Sorry, love. But I'm Forma. And I'm in."

* * *

Vi staggered a little as they turned the corner, just a block away from the Last Drop. She almost whimpered in relief as she saw

the glowing sign in the distance. Her ribs flared hot, probably cracked. But Gert would have a bit of Shimmer handy. Sevika was gasping too after the long walk back.

"What are gonna do about that *worm*?" Vi bit out.

"Silco?"

"Knew we couldn't trust him."

"Vi," Sevika said, stopping for a moment in the street. She laid her mechanical hand heavy on Vi's shoulder. "You did fucking good today. Bool is…" She sighed. "Bool will come 'round. We got a lot of miners on side, and they'll talk to their friends. This is gonna work."

Vi sighed, more tired than she'd been in years.

"And Silco?"

Fury burned deep in Sevika's eyes.

"Leave that bastard to me."

11

Mel

"So, there's something in the works."

"Mm, intriguing. What is it?"

"I can't really tell you."

"Well, that's helpful," Mel rolled her eyes.

Jayce smiled. "Sorry. It's not personal. Even I don't know much."

"I see." *Glad to see some of these rebels have* some *prudence.* They walked along a slender bridge over the bustling Undercity market below them.

"But, I'm to pass a couple of things along."

"Yes?" She grabbed for the rail as the bridge swayed with Jayce's steps. The thin, curving metal was not as steady as she'd like.

"Something's going to happen soon which will make topside a little…upset."

"Am I at risk?" she said sharply.

"Of course not!" Jayce looked shocked.

"Excellent. I would apologise for the question, but it's not exactly unwarranted."

He sighed. "No, it's not. But, no, nothing to do with you. Directly, anyway."

"And what can I do about it?"

"Just, try and sway the discussion. Piltover will uh, definitely want to respond. If you can encourage restraint, that's probably good." He gave her a grin. "But we can take what's coming."

Mel snorted. "Being cocky is a good way to get your people killed."

"You don't know what we've been cooking up. Viktor hasn't slept in days." He frowned, concerned.

"I don't, no," she said, frustration leaking into her voice. "I don't like not knowing, Jayce."

"I know," he said softly. "I'm telling you as much as I can."

She itched to push him. His face was already so delightfully easy to read. With a few pointed questions, and she could probably tease out this whole movement and all their plans.

But something held her back.

"I do understand. Trust will take time." She'd also thought seriously about seizing the Hexgates. She could control all Piltover *and* Zaun with those things. And when she'd sent Lest to go investigate them further, she reported that the Firelights only kept a couple of guards posted at the cave when the Gates weren't in use. She shook her head. *Amateurs.*

They walked in silence for a time, drawing nearer to the shaft that led up to Piltover. She shifted her bag to the other shoulder. It was weighed down with some of the things she'd had sent through the Hexgates from Noxus, via shadowy Zaunite connections. Jayce twitched, clearly stopping himself

from offering yet again to carry it.

"We're going a different way to usual," she noted. Though Mel had only visited the Gates a handful of times over the past few months, Jayce usually took her through the city at street level.

"Yeah, I wanted to take a more scenic route today." He ran a hand through his long hair. "I like watching the markets from up here."

She looked down into the bustle below them. People teemed around long tables full of food, yelling out as they greeted each other.

"It's beautiful," Mel agreed, and he smiled. She cocked her head as she looked more closely. "Are those Ionian citruses? I haven't seen one in years."

"Yeah, one of our people finally made their way across to Ionia with a Gate. We got the link set up a few weeks ago."

"Goodness, how much are they selling the citrus for? Must be a fortune."

Jayce grinned widely. "Actually, it's free."

"Free?"

"Yeah, the whole market."

Mel stopped in shock. "They're giving it all away?"

"Anyone in Zaun with the funds to spare pitches in to keep it all running. Or anyone who manages to…" he paused, awkward. "…acquire food without paying for it." He gave her a sly look.

She gripped the railing tightly. *He can't be serious.* "And this is run by the Firelights?"

Jayce frowned. "Actually, I don't know who's running it. A few people just started pulling it together a while ago." He looked down fondly. "I haven't seen this many tables before. Nice to see. And you can already tell the difference. People

coming past the Firelight tree look better. Healthier."

"Tree?"

"Oh, uh— yeah." Jayce looked nervous for a moment. "It's a euphemism. Don't worry about it."

Mel frowned, too distracted to pry further. "I— that's—"

"Different?" He cocked an eyebrow. "Refreshing?"

She nodded, lost for words. *Do they know how much those citrus would go for in Piltover? And they're just throwing it away.*

"We can go sometime, if you like. Or y'know, if you want to help. Bring some food. Give some funds." He eyed her pointedly.

"I…" She swallowed. "I'll think about it."

They walked in silence for a few more minutes as Mel chewed on that. They crossed several bridges, then descended a tight, spiral staircase. Mel realised they were only a few blocks from the staircase to Piltover. *It'll be weeks until I can come back.* The thought made something turn over in her chest.

Jayce fidgeted with something on his wrist. "Hey, uh…there's a bar not far from here that's pretty good. Serves this acid shot that turns you blind for a minute." He grinned as Mel shuddered. "We could…stop by?"

"Jayce," she said gently. "I'm a councillor. I stand out. I can't stop by bars down here."

"Oh, yeah." His face fell.

The Undercity buildings stopped at a rock wall with a small, nondescript doorway. *Just a few more steps. And who knows what will happen between this time and next?*

"Well—"

"There is somewhere else we could get a drink," she said suddenly.

"Oh yeah?"

She flicked her eyes up to the buildings above, recklessness churning inside her.

"Mel, I can't. I was exiled, remember?" He huffed a laugh. "You were there?"

"Oh, come on. That doesn't sound like the attitude of someone who is currently trying to overthrow a government."

"We're not trying to *overthrow*— I—" He blushed a little.

"Jayce," she murmured, stepping closer. "I'll tell you now…you certainly don't look anything like the prim Academy boy I first met." Her gaze lingered on his beard.

He sighed, and looked up at the city above, the tall, arching buildings. There was something wistful in his eyes.

"Alright."

* * *

The pod ascended slowly. The elevator was a rather open secret among the elites of Piltover, for whenever they wanted to dabble in the delights of the city below. Through a seam in the rock face, they had a good view of Zaun dropping away below them, lit by that distinctive neon glow.

I just referred to it as Zaun, Mel realised with a star. *It* is *a good name.*

The pod slowed to a stop. Jayce's eyes widened at the lush, Piltover street visible just beyond the glass. He pressed his fingers to the window.

"Wait," he breathed. She watched him for a few long moments.

Finally, he turned to her, looking torn.

"I'm afraid we should probably keep it to a quick trip," she

said softly. "Stay out in the streets, among the crowds. If we stop anywhere for long, we may be more easily recognised."

He said nothing.

"Jayce?"

He finally turned away from the window, something settled in his eyes. He nodded.

They stepped out of the pod. The streetlights glowed warm in the early evening. The street was quiet and sleey. There were a few couples wandering past, arm in arm, dressed in neat Piltovian attire.

"Oh," Jayce breathed. "The smell."

"Mmm?"

"The flowers. I forgot."

Mel smiled. "It's one of my favourite things about this city."

They wandered slowly down the cobbled street. Jayce was dressed in his usual style; long strips of leather wound around his limbs, with utilitarian pieces of metal anchored on his elbow, his shoulder, his knees. His hair hung shaggy. He wore a tattered, cropped, brown vest. His large arms and toned torso were bare, showing off one small symbol tattooed on his stomach. She tried not to let her gaze linger there.

He almost screamed *undercity*. They certainly drew the eye as they walked. Mel kept her hood close around her face.

"Wait, we're near to…" His eyes lit up. "Oh, Mel, I know where we can go. Have you been around the south of the city much?"

"I haven't," she said with a smile. "But then, I haven't had a suitable guide."

He grinned. "This way, it's not far."

He chatted as they walked, animated, telling stories about his childhood, a few teen misadventures.

Jayce perked up as they rounded a corner. "They're still open!

Always stayed open late."

They were in a small plaza, with a fountain trickling in the centre of the square. There was a small cart on the corner, handing out steaming cups of something.

"Best hot chocolate you'll ever have," he promised. His eyes were bright and warm as they met hers. "What kind of things do you like?"

"What do you mean?"

"Do you like…spice? Sweet things? You like those Ionian citruses."

Something twisted in her chest. *No one has ever asked me something like that. Usually far too intimidated by the Medarda name.* She smiled ruefully. *Or, my mother.*

"I love citrus," she said softly.

"They should have just the thing." Jayce grinned. "Your shout, councillor."

She snorted and fished a coin out of her pocket. He went up to the vendor, chatting away about the drinks on offer. Mel waited, watching him as a charmed smile spread over the vendor's face. *He's got a real gift for that. Charming people.*

Like me, she thought. *Foolish girl.*

He returned with two cups, handing her one. The drink warmed her hands deliciously. Mel sipped. It was lovely, the rich chocolate flavour balanced with a sharp, acid tang.

Jayce watched her face closely. "Mmm," she sighed. He beamed.

"Let's go sit." They made their way to the fountain and perched on the stone edge. Mel dropped her bag beside her.

They sat in companionable silence for a minute or two. Jayce watched the Piltovians around them enjoying their evening, a sad look in his eye.

Mel nudged her knee against his. "What is it?"

He looked down. "My mother. I miss her. I…sometimes I write. Not much. I can't bring myself to lie to her, and she can't know where I am." He rubbed a patch of oil on his pants. "She'd attack me with a stain remover if she…if she saw me like this."

Mel's heart ached. Then, despite the voice in her gut warning her not to share too much about her—

"I am in exile from my family, and my lands. Though *my* mother was the one to cast me out. You already know a bit about her." Her lips quirked.

"You are?" he breathed. "I'm sorry."

She shrugged a shoulder. "I wasn't ruthless enough for Medarda standards." Jayce looked at her for a long moment. "I've made peace with it." She glanced down quickly at the lie.

"So, she's kind of power-hungry?"

"Yes. Though she doesn't seek power for power's sake, nor for ego, or greed, or cruelty. I have always admired that."

"Then…for what?"

"To protect family." Her voice deepened, echoing Ambessa's words, spoken to her thousands of times.

"Hmm," said Jayce, thoughtful. "And you…I mean, you seek power. You made your way onto the Council. Ekko says you're one of the wealthiest people in the city."

"I am," she said.

"But you…don't have a family." He blinked. "Wait, do you?"

She snorted. "No, Jayce, I have no children or spouses that I've forgotten to mention."

"Wouldn't blame you for keeping them safe."

"There is that."

There was a pause.

"Then…why do it?" Jayce asked. "Build the power that you

have? Who do *you* protect?"

No one. The answer passed through her like a knife. No family, and no people of her own. Of course she cared for Piltover, and was a good leader for its people, she thought. But…they weren't *her* people.

"I don't know."

After a few moments, Jayce ran a hand through his hair. "I'm sorry, I didn't think before I— that was rude, I—"

"No," she said softly. "It's just that…no one's ever asked me anything like that before. I do love Piltover, but…" She gave him a half-smile. "Not all of us can change peoples as easily as you have."

"Not that easily," he muttered.

They sat in silence again, absorbed in their own thoughts.

He's right. Aren't I *seeking power for power's sake? They all fight to build a new Zaun. But...what am I trying to build? And for who?* The thought disturbed her.

Jayce sat up straighter, pulling her out of her ruminating. He was looking across the square with a frown.

Around half a dozen men stood in a group a little way from them. They looked young, late teens maybe. They wore rumpled uniforms, to one of the elite schools of the city, Mel couldn't remember which. A few were watching them.

Well, watching Jayce. One muttered something, and they all laughed.

"Trouble?" she murmured. Jayce didn't reply. He put his cup down as they started to walk towards them, and Mel followed suit.

The tallest looked Jayce up and down as the pack approached.

"Don't see many of your kind around here," he said, crossing his arms with a smirk.

Jayce stayed seated, looking up at them. Mel could see the tension in his frame. He just gave a careful shrug.

"Normally fissure-shits stay down in their little cracks," said another with a vicious smile. They all laughed.

"Just enjoying the night," Jayce said. His jaw was tight under the beard. Mel itched to jump in. All she had to do was lower her hood, and the sight of her gold-flecked cheeks would send them falling over their feet with apologies to the esteemed councillor.

But as her hands moved to her hood, Jayce shot her a look. *Don't*. If she revealed herself, there were going to be a lot of questions about why she was in the city's south, late at night with a cloak and a *fissure-shit.*

"Well, we *were* enjoying our night, weren't we lads?" The tall one looked around at the pack, who muttered in agreement. "Until some little sump-rat crawled their way up somewhere they don't belong. You're a bit of an eyesore. No offence." That drew another laugh.

Mel bit her tongue. *If they knew who I am—*

"We can be on our way," Jayce said calmly. Mel saw the muscles twitch in his forearm

The tall one tilted his head the other way. "I don't know. I don't think you've learned your lesson about your *place*."

She saw in Jayce's face the moment when he thought, *fuck this*.

Jayce rose slowly to his feet. He was half a foot taller than the boy, and his wide shoulders cut an imposing figure. The boys gathered a little closer to each other, though they were still pinning the two of them against the fountain.

"We'll be on our way." Jayce's voice was deep and chilling. One of his hands curled into a fist, the one wrapped in leather around the knuckles. Mel rose to stand beside him, slinging

her bag onto her shoulders. They barely glanced at her and her drab grey cloak.

The tall one stuck out his chin and met Jayce's eye.

"We still have a lesson to teach you, little *chem-rat*."

His fist swung. Jayce shoved the boy's arm as it came towards him, deflecting the blow with ease. Mel braced herself, and slipped easily into the state her mother had drilled into her for so many long years. She opened her awareness and watched the bodies of all six men, seeing their moves far before they ever swung.

One boy swung for Jayce's torso, which he blocked, but a third punch landed. Jayce growled and surged forwards. His fist connected with the boy's jaw.

He staggered back with a shout, and that fired them all up. They attacked together. Though Mel was impressed with the way Jayce held his ground, she could see he'd never actually been in a fight before. There was panic in his movements, and he held himself back even as he landed his blows. Mel's body was tight as a wire as she hovered, but she knew she couldn't intervene without revealing herself.

It only took a well-aimed kick to the back of the knee to get him on the ground. Jayce bit out a yell.

"No!" she cried. She surged forwards.

"Stop," he grunted, but his eyes looked straight at her. *Don't.* The boys kicked hard. The sound of thudding blows was sickening.

Then one of them spotted something behind her and yelled out. "Look! They'll get the chem-rat back down where he belongs!"

Mel whipped around. Two Enforcers had entered the square, on patrol. They walked slowly, probably not expecting trouble

in this sleepy corner of Piltover. They stopped in their tracks at the sight of them all.

Jayce's bloodied eyes met hers again. *Fuck.*

She darted forwards, taking advantage of their momentary distraction. One boy tried to stop her, but she moved fluidly around his clumsy grab.

Damn you, Mother, she couldn't help thinking. *Those thousands of drills do come in handy.*

Mel swooped down, grasping Jayce's hand and helping him stand. A fist swung for her face. She jabbed rigid fingers into the boy's solar plexus. He staggered back, breathless.

Mel gripped Jayce's arm tight. She stabbed her elbow into the face of the last teen standing in their way. His nose crunched underneath it. *Ah, I forgot that feeling.*

They broke through the pack and started to run. Jayce gasped with every step.

They heard a yell behind them. *The Enforcers.* "Oi, chem-rat!"

They ran hard, down a narrow street. Jayce kept up admirably. Mel was grateful she'd kept up a light training routine in her own time, keeping her strong, as he leaned heavily on her.

The thumps of Enforcer boots echoed behind them. They weaved around tranquil Piltover citizens on their night walks. They cried out at the shoves of a bloodied, Undercity sump-rat.

Mel spotted a crack in the wall up ahead. "In here." She yanked hard on his arm, and pulled him into the narrow gap. There was barely enough space for them both, crammed in together.

"Mel, I don't think—"

"They'll run past," she panted.

"Mel—"

"Hush, Jayce."

His chest heaved beside hers, and his grip on her hand was hard as iron. She gripped him just as tightly. They watched the street, as adrenaline surging through her.

If the Enforcers saw us duck in here, we're done for. Maybe they'll just kick Jayce back down into the Lanes. But if they recognise him as Jayce Talis, the exile...

Gods, I didn't think this through at all, did I? Bringing him up here because he's got a nice smile and asks me nice questions. You fool, Mel Medarda.

The clatter of boots came closer—

Gold and blue uniforms flashed in the gap before them. Then vanished.

They ran straight past.

Mel let out a slow, shaking breath. Jayce leaned his head back against the wall. She rested her forehead on his shoulder.

"Are you alright?" she whispered.

Jayce didn't answer. His body trembled against her.

"Jayce."

His breathing sped up, and he began to gasp.

"I'm— fine—" He squeezed his eyes shut, tears welling. "I fucking hate when this happens," he gasped out between gritted teeth. "I just need a— minute— *fuck*."

"Squeeze my hand."

His eyes popped open and he looked at her wild-eyed. "Mel, I am."

"Harder."

"You'll *break*."

She gripped his fingers as hard as she could. "So cocky, Jayce." She forced herself to smile. "Come on, show me what you've got."

He looked shocked, but he squeezed harder. *Gods above, he's*

strong.

"Is that— all?" Mel gasped as the pressure increased even more.

"I can't squeeze harder."

"Liar," she said. Then pain flashed through her hand, and she gasped a laugh.

"F— fine, you win!"

Jayce's hand went limp immediately. He frowned at her.

"What the hell are you doing?"

"Better?" she asked.

His breathing, though still ragged, had slowed.

"…yeah."

"You can do it with yourself. Grasp your own hands, and squeeze as tight as you can. After a fight, the adrenaline overflow can easily spiral into panic attacks like that. Physical pressure and distraction can help." She gave him a half-smile. "And humour often breaks someone out of the mental panic spiral."

"Huh," was all he said. They were both quiet for a few moments, as their breathing gradually slowed.

Jayce thumped his head softly against the wall. "Idiot," he muttered.

"What?"

"I was an idiot. I'm sorry."

"What?"

"I shouldn't've picked the fight." Jayce ran a hand through his hair. "There were too many of them. I put all our plans at risk."

"That behaviour of theirs was despicable," she spat.

"That was Piltover," he said simply. "I should have known better. Vi would have walked away from that, and she'd punch a wall if it looked at her wrong."

Mel snorted. "Well, *I'm* sorry."

"What?"

"I was the one who brought you up here."

He scoffed. "That's ridiculous. I chose to."

"Still. I'm sorry. And for not helping more."

"If they found out who you were, everything would've fallen apart."

"But they would have *stopped."* she hissed. Mel looked him over with a critical eye. "Where did they hurt you?"

He shrugged, but his face twisted in pain at the movement. "I'll be alright. I can get back."

"*Can* you?"

"Had worse."

"I mean, you haven't been in many fights."

Jayce's gaze slowly met hers. "I haven't, no. Did it show?"

She looked away. "Not to them, maybe."

"But *you* could tell. And you dropped a few of them yourself, didn't you?"

She didn't answer.

"You can really fight."

She said nothing.

Jayce gave a long sigh. "Well, I'm grateful for it today."

She ignored the pang in her chest. That damn misplaced gratitude for her mother. "As am I."

Jayce shifted his weight with a wince, testing out his injuries.

"You know, it's a long way back down," she said. "If you want to rest somewhere up here…" Her gut clenched as she spoke, and she couldn't bring herself to finish the offer.

"Thank you." His eyes were warm as they met hers. "But I…I can't stay up here."

"We'll be more careful."

"No, it's—" he broke off. Anger and grief shadowed his gaze. "I don't want to be up here another minute longer than I have to. Clearly, Piltover is not my home anymore."

She was quiet. After a long moment, he looked at her.

"But thank you, Mel."

They stayed hidden for a while, attempting to wait out the Enforcers and the over-cocky schoolboys. They made their way back carefully to the elevator through little deserted alleyways. Bruises were starting to blossom on Jayce's jaw as the delicate doors slid shut. He gazed out at her through the window as the pod began to descend.

Mel could not read the look in his eyes.

12

Sevika

Sevika slammed the battered door open.

"You greedy snake," she snarled.

Silco looked up lazily from his needle as he primed it with Shimmer. "Now, there's no need for that."

Jinx slipped into the office behind Sevika. Silco's eyes watched her carefully as she slunk around to the window beside him. She leapt onto the ledge, curling up there. She looked out, barely acknowledging him.

Sevika rounded the desk. "*Why* would you go to the miners and try and make a deal without us?"

"I thought your little group declared that the use of the Hexgates was open to all," he sneered. "Don't want to seize control, something something?"

"This is not about one group. And you're not just some other Zaunite merchant, Silco. You're at the centre of this. Without your trade networks between the cities, without *you*, we're done

for. Piltover and its finest are nervous, the Medarda told us. They're watching us build this and soon they're gonna come for *all* of us."

"That smug little councillor," he muttered. "She'll take advantage of us all the moment we let her close enough."

"The only one betraying us right now if *you,* you two-faced shit." Sevika stood over him.

"Why'd you do it?" Jinx asked bitterly. She didn't look away from the window.

Silco's eyes darted to her again, blue and red, until Sevika slammed her fist onto the desk beside him.

"I simply presented them with another option. Isn't that allowed?" His eyes were sharp as a cat's.

"Don't bullshit me, Silco. You owe me better than that," she snarled. "I thought you were in this."

He shrugged. "Perhaps I simply wanted to make use of the resources of our great people."

Sevika scoffed. "To line your pockets? I knew it. I knew you were just another worm."

"Why?" Jinx asked again. She curled herself up tight.

He sat forwards, his face cold and spiteful.

"Perhaps I wanted to save them from a horrible death at the fists of Enforc—" He cut off with a gurgle as Sevika's hand shot out and dug into his throat. She grinned as she felt his pulse under her fingers. It was frustratingly steady.

"Maybe next time you should think about *my* fists," she whispered into his face. He said nothing, breathing shallowly.

"Veek," Jinx murmured.

Sevika held him there for a few long moments, watching with satisfaction as his face begin to flush. *But the bastard still won't flinch,* she thought. *How many fucking times have I done this for*

him when he needed me to scare someone into line? Tough little shit.

She broke her grip. Silco gasped, as she leaned against the desk and crossed her arms.

"*Veek*," he rasped, his lip curling. "How sweet."

"It's what Vi calls her," Jinx said defensively.

"One of the family now, are you?" he snapped at Sevika. "How would the kind-hearted Vi feel about you throwing your allies around by the throat?"

"If you think she's soft, you don't know her at all," Sevika said darkly. "I told her I would sort this out. She doesn't care how."

"I told her you were with us." Jinx's voice cracked.

Silco stared daggers at her. "Then I suppose you've disappointed your new *sister*." He hissed the last word, then turned away, rubbing his throat. Jinx flinched.

"I'm going to pop out that poison eye of yours and make you eat it," Sevika said venomously.

He chuckled. "Well, that *does* sound like the way we treat family in these god-forsaken pits."

"Don't you want that?" Jinx asked quietly. She slid a little closer to him. Her pink eyes had a broken look.

Silco's fingers tightened around the needle in his hand. "How would you know what I want? I haven't seen you in months."

Sevika was quiet, watching them.

"Don't you want…family?" Jinx whispered.

"Don't you say that word," he said. "Not to me."

Emotions warred on her face. "You could come to the tree sometime."

"And eat poorly seasoned stew, and listen to some amateur crooning over a guitar?" His lip curled. "*You* could come *here*. Leave this doomed rebellion behind you. We can build something better, stronger." He looked at her. "You were always

so good at being strong. It's something I—" he looked away. "—I always admired about you."

"But it's…kinda nice not being strong." Jinx hugged her knees closed to her chest. "I…I don't have to be anymore."

"Because of your big, strong sister, is it?" He rolled his eyes.

"Yeah," was all she said.

They were silent. Jinx fidgeted with the end of her braid.

"I missed you, too." Her voice trembled.

"Don't bullshit me, Jinx," he snapped.

"I *did*. I know it's been a while."

"It has. But I guess you've been *busy.*"

"I've been happy." Her voice was small.

"With your tree and that boy and your big new sister. Without—" He broke off again.

"*Come* to the tree. I'll show you."

Silco looked at her, his mouth pressed into a thin line. "They're soft, Jinx. We're not."

"Come with me."

"They don't *want* me there. They don't trust me."

Sevika's hands curled into fists. "Of course we don't, you little—"

"Shut up, Sevika," Jinx cut her off. She scowled. Silco shot her a look, almost smug.

Jinx slid to the floor and kneeled there. She looking up at Silco. His face softened a little.

"I didn't think I could do it," she murmured. "Be…I dunno. Soft. Normal. Like them."

"You don't have to pretend to be something you're not," he said, voice gentle. "They want to tame you."

"They don't," she said.

"We *scare* them."

"We *don't.*" Her eyes were wide, pleading. "I thought so, too. I thought Vi would never…" She blinked, looking down. "I didn't think she'd understand. Me."

"She doesn't. Not like I do."

"But she tries." Jinx voice trembled. "It's not perfect. She can still be a goddamn pain in the ass when she thinks she's right."

"Which is always," Sevika muttered.

Jinx snorted. "Yeah. But then…she talks to me about it. And tries to get it. And…it's enough."

"I don't believe you." Silco bit the words out.

Jinx's eyes flashed pink with anger. "I scare *you*. Because I left you. You didn't think I could do that."

Silco blinked, shocked. "I— Jinx, I don't—"

"Didn't think of that, did ya."

He looked down into his lap. "…no."

"It's alright." She smiled, anger gone as quick as it came. "I didn't think I could, either. But maybe it's not a bad thing."

"Jinx."

"I *did* leave. I'm sorry."

Silco said nothing, but pain tightened his face.

Jinx reached out. Her fingertips rested on the needle that lay in his slack fingers. "But if you hold me back…that's not being family. And I want you to be in my family."

Silco was frozen. The creases on his face looked deeper as he looked at his daughter. His hand trembled around the needle.

Then he tilted it just a little towards her.

Jinx grasped it. She rose up to kneel on her knees.

"I'm sorry," she said again.

Silco leaned forwards slowly. He gave a long sigh.

"I missed you."

Sevika had never heard before that voice from him before.

"I know." Jinx raised the needle, and positioned it carefully over his eye.

"Thank you," he breathed. She pressed down. He gasped at Shimmer shot into the eye, and she removed it cleanly. Silco panted as she sat back on her heels.

"So…the tree sometime?" she asked, cocking her head.

Silco threw Sevika a look. She gave him a half-hearted scowl. "Can't believe you almost fucked up a whole rebellion just because you were jealous."

"No need to be a sore winner, Sevika," he said wryly.

She smirked. "Couldn't help myself."

He looked back at Jinx, gaze softening. "You'd like that?"

She nodded, a smile spreading on her face.

He sighed, leaning back in the chair. "If someone asks me to sing, I will silence them. Permanently."

Jinx bounced to her feet. "Sometimes there's a hair braiding circle. Though no one does it as well as you."

Sevika raised her eyebrows in shock. *Silco* was the one who first did Jinx's braids?

He gave Jinx a small, genuine smile. "No need to soften me up, little one. I'm in."

"You're *in* in?" Jinx asked.

Sevika watched him closely. Silco gave her a resigned look.

"I suppose I am."

13

Mel

It had been a week since she last saw Jayce. A week since he warned her that Zaun was up to something. Each time a Council meeting was called, she entered the room on tenterhooks. As she took her seat that day, a nudge in her gut told her that today would be it.

Hoskel's face was like a beetroot ready to explode. The moment the session was called to order, he slammed a fist on to the table.

"Councillors, there is a serious problem brewing that will affect us all, and the prosperity of Piltover itself!"

"Well, Councillor Hoskel, do tell," Mel said, languid.

"My mines, in the depths of the Undercity," he spluttered. "The little *rats* have seized them for themselves!"

"Seized them?" Shoola asked, incredulous.

"Yes! They kicked out my men and took over the living quarters. I heard they conducted themselves disgracefully,

yelling and shoving, oh what I wouldn't give to crush those—"

"Yes, thank you, Hoskel, we get the picture," Mel said. She swallowed down a smile. *Clever. And effective. The Council will not take this lightly.*

"What will they even *do* with the minerals?" Cassandra Kiramman asked with a frown.

"Perhaps they can eat them. Half of them are half metal anyway, maybe they've *evolved* to digest it," Salo said. A sneer twisted his delicate face. Mel frowned in distaste.

"Nonetheless," said Cassandra. "If they are still extracting the minerals, and have thrown poor Hoskel's men out of the mines…what are they doing with them? Selling them?"

"Councillor Medarda, you came to us months ago and told us you had discovered strange new technology in the Undercity, somehow enabling trade over long distances," Shoola said, gesturing around the room. "We have all been feeling the effects of this. Contracts are not being renewed, trade is slowing, tax revenues have dropped. Do we presume that the miners are using this to trade directly with contractors overseas, while abandoning the rest of Piltover?"

"We can only presume," she agreed delicately.

"Have your agents been able to find out anything more about this new technology?" Heimerdinger demanded.

"They have not, unfortunately." Mel told the lie effortlessly.

"Well, this had better not affect the upgrades to my home after those *chem-rats* desecrated it," Salo said, his lip curling. "Hoskel, I had arrangements with an artisan of yours. If you can't get the raw materials because of all this, what on earth am I to do?"

"The entire *house* of *Hoskel* is at stake, boy, and the economy of this whole city!" he snapped. "If I don't get those metals, I

won't meet my contracts. Heimerdinger, you can forget about any new inventions for a while. The City of Progress will grind to a halt!"

"Ah! Perhaps I could simply trade with the Undercity directly," the professor said brightly.

Hoskel shot to his feet. "You don't understand," he growled. "Those workers have barricaded us out of the mines, they almost chased my men out of the Undercity entirely. If we let them get away with this, what will the rest of them do? We'll have a full-scale revolt on our hands!"

"It does seem that, if unpunished, this action would inspire more widespread unrest among the Undercity," Cassandra said. Her eyes were thoughtful.

"Surely they have demands?" asked Mel carefully. "There is always a negotiation to be made. You do hear some grisly stories of the conditions in those mines, Hoskel."

"My mines are perfectly safe!" he snapped. "If they don't like them, they can go work somewhere else. No, all they said was they'll talk to us *'when Zaun is free'*. What is that nonsense all about?"

Mel went to speak, but Cassandra answered first. "It is a separatist movement among some in the Undercity," she said in a crisp voice. "They would like to self-govern."

Salo snorted. "They'd put the chem-barons and addicts in charge of themselves? I doubt they can even pronounce the word 'legislature', a Piltovian child could figure out governance better than those chem-addled brains. At least they'll probably kill themselves off with poor self-management. You'd get your precious mines back, Hoskel."

Mel looked at him sharply, disgusted. "Councillor Salo. Your comments this evening continue to turn the stomach. Might

we all keep in mind that those in the Undercity are citizens of this government, and deserving of the most basic level of respect?" Cassandra nodded at her words.

"Well then, all I'll say is, I'm starting to see the appeal of separating," Salo said petulantly.

"There is a larger pattern appearing," Shoola said slowly. "For months now, we've had to compete with the Undercity in trade because of this mysterious advantage of theirs, and been losing. Now, such a bold move such as this?" She frowned. "I admit, I find this deeply troubling."

"Is there anything so bad about allowing the Undercity to grow more of a foothold in international trade? Do they not have that right?" Mel asked. She kept her tone as mild as she could.

Cassandra gave her a warm smile. "Mel, I appreciate your compassion for these people. It's a credit to you. But there are certainly risks to allowing disturbing, rebellious sentiments such as these to spread. And without those minerals, Piltover will suffer greatly."

Hoskel's hands were curled into fists. "I want to use the Enforcers to take back my mines! They will *pay* for their audacity! The next lot of sump-rats are getting half the food rations, keep them too hungry to get any ideas like this."

"I wasn't aware that the city's Enforcers were to be used to resolve the private business needs of Piltovians," Mel said carefully.

"What?" he snapped. "This is clearly a violation of law and order! Squashing this little movement is for the public good!"

"I'm not convinced that—"

"We must keep the peace, Mel." said Cassandra firmly.

"If we offer to instate a trade agreement with the miners

directly, surely we would be able to *peacefully* restore Piltover's access to the minerals?" She managed to keep the desperation out of her voice. *Maybe the Zaunites would even go for it. No need to separate completely from Piltover, if we can just agree to better conditions.*

Hoskel shot her a hostile look. "Oh, that's nice of you, Councillor. Maybe I'll fall into the sumps myself once I lose my wealth, my house, my *council seat—*"

"All I'm trying to do is explore other means to keep the peace, that don't involve sending Enforcers down there to violently seize back *your* private property."

Cassandra gave an elegant shrug. "They did start the violence, Mel."

The sound of Piltover boots digging into Jayce's flesh came back to her.

Shoola sighed, still looking uncertain. "I do wonder about what comes next if we let this slide."

"Heimerdinger?" Mel said, turning to him.

The small Yordle didn't meet her gaze. "Piltover does need those minerals, Councillor Medarda. This would set our work at the Academy back decades." Bolbok nodded beside him.

Frustration bubbled up in her. "This use of Enforcers is unconscionable," she said loudly. "I struggle to find fault in the demands of the Zaunites for—"

"Zaunites?" Salo's voice was scathing. "Mel, that's quite the soft spot you have there for a bunch of filthy, chem-addled thugs."

Tension thrummed through her. *Gods, he really hates them*. "Well I do apologise for this, Councillor Hoskel, but we will not be achieving a unanimous vote today. I refuse to sanction this."

The rest of the Council gave her frustrated glares.

There you go, Jayce. I wonder if you give negotiating a try.

* * *

The Council adjourned for the day. Mel wandered to a walkway that looked out onto the city. It was her favourite place to go to collect herself after more distressing sessions. Elora went to follow her, but she gave her a quick look to say *give me a minute*.

She leaned against a pillar, watching sunset fall over the city. The sun set the cluttered golden buildings ablaze, as it did the designs etched into her skin. *Did the gold for all these homes come from the Zaunite mines?* The whole city was built on Zaun in more ways than one.

Her city. Was it? She certainly didn't want it to be today. The way that Salo and Hoskel threw those words around…and was she really the only one to push back about this?

"Mel," came a soft voice. She turned to see Councillor Shoola approaching her. Mel gave her a respectful nod.

"Quite the session, wasn't it?" The woman's elaborate cuff clicked softly.

"Sometimes, we cannot find agreement. These things happen," Mel said with forced nonchalance. She had strained her relationships with her fellow councillors today, and needed to put in some effort for repair. "It is why the vote must be unanimous, to respect all perspectives."

"Indeed," Shoola said. She looked troubled.

"Perhaps negotiations can be attempted with the miners, after all. There must be a way to restore things."

Shoola gave her a slightly pitying look. "Mel…Hoskel is going

to use the Enforcers."

Mel frowned. "He can't. The vote failed."

"He will."

"How?"

"Executive order in the face of threat. Or some other loophole, it doesn't matter. I give him twenty-four hours with his advisors to come back with some solution. He just didn't anticipate there would be pushback today."

"*I* didn't anticipate the callousness of my fellow councillors," she said bitterly.

Shoola tilted her head, unfazed. "Then I think perhaps you have more to learn about this city and its people," she said softly.

She walked away. Mel stared out over Piltover and Zaun as she considered the arguments she could bring to try and sway the Council towards peace. She was left with an uncomfortable and unfamiliar feeling of naivety as she remembered Salo's venomous words, and the arguments withered on her tongue.

14

Jayce

Boom. Jayce jumped as the blast rattled the rock floor beneath him, falling to one knee. Dust fell around them, drifting with the chem-fog in the narrow mining tunnel.

"Was that us or them?!" he yelled to Vi.

"Don't care!" she yelled back. "We need to get back to the cavern." Her gauntlet swung, connecting with an Enforcer's chest with a crackle of blue lightening. They flew through the air, and Jayce winced as they slammed against the tunnel wall.

Cait, Cait, was it Cait? No, too large. Jayce didn't have any way of finding out if she would be fighting here today; he couldn't exactly reach out in a letter and ask, not without giving everything away.

Jayce's whole body was trembling, both hot and cold. But he sucked in a deep breath through the gas mask. The stale air was oddly grounding. He squeezed the hammer shaft as tight as he could, and thought of Mel for a moment, the feeling of

her hand gripping his, bringing him back to calm.

He remembered that night and the horrible feeling of helplessness as they kicked him into the cobblestones. If it weren't for Mel, Jayce would probably have been hauled away by Enforcers, disappeared into the river or to Stillwater. Never to see Zaun again.

Vi had chewed him out for his recklessness afterwards, until Jinx had just cackled; "Vi, remember the Slickjaw boys? You got your face broken after taking them when you were like, twelve? Vander was so pissed." She'd shrugged. "Sounds like jawline finally had a real fight. Let's put him in when we take over the mines. That new hammer of his will be handy." He'd agreed, insisting he'd been training to fight for months with Vi. He was ready.

That hammer glowed in his hands, powered by a gem inside. Jayce had yet to make contact with another person, though.

The Enforcers had broken through the barricaded living quarters a while ago. The fighting shoved him and Vi down into one of the fissures off the main cavern, tight and claustrophobic as they swung at Enforcer shadows.

A few miners stomped towards them and past. They moved as a pack, running deeper into the fissure on the heels of a few Enforcers. Jayce couldn't help inspecting the glowing blue weapons as they passed, frowning at a loose gemstone. Jayce, Viktor, Ekko, Jinx, and anyone in Zaun who could turn a spanner had been working around the clock to spit out that tech, ready for today.

Bool brought up the rear, swinging a shield the size of a door effortlessly into an Enforcer's face. He stopped beside them, scanning around them for threats.

"Boy, I tell ya, this is all worth it to get to swing this thing

around," he grunted at Jayce. "Fuckin' magic."

"You really got on board for the right reasons, then," Vi shouted over another loud *boom.* The narrow tunnel was lit by a pink glow from the cavern. Jayce and Vi looked at each other. *Jinx,* they nodded.

"Just be grateful I'm here, kid," he said. "There's a few more blue-bellies in the tunnels, but we flushed most of 'em out." He grinned. "Lots with the little bugs attached, too. Your sister is a menace."

Vi shook her head, grin hidden behind her gas mask. "She sure is something. We're getting back to the cavern. Let's go scare them off for good."

Bool nodded. "We'll get the last ones." He ran on into the narrow depths.

"Come on," she said, and Jayce hauled himself to his feet. They ran through the rock dust up the sloping tunnel. It was difficult to manoeuvre the giant hammer in this space. *Idiot,* he thought. *Next time, don't get pinned down into a tight space. You haven't got the weapon for it*. He gripped it tight.

As if Vi could hear his thoughts, she shot him a look. "You're doing great. You can do this, yeah?" He nodded as they approached the entrance.

They broke out into the cavern. With the chem-fog, rock dust, and whatever gas the Enforcers had released, you could barely see a few meters ahead. Flashes lit up all around them; Enforcers, miners, Firelights, chem-barons, and any Zaunite willing to fight. He could see Renni swinging her green, glowing chainsaw with a wild cackle. A few purple Shimmer-suits flew through the fog, backed up by zipping Firelights.

Vi stomped towards a clump of Enforcers, fearless. She laid into them, fists swinging, as they went flying. Jayce took a few

steps forward. *Come on, let's do this.*

Then he stuttered to a halt. His breath was loud in his ears.

I can't.

He blinked. He was back in the alley, that very first day. His healed ankle gave a phantom throb as he saw Enforcer armour glinting in the fog.

I have to do this, don't let them down.

He thought of that poor boy. *Come on—*

Jayce blinked at the shadow of an Enforcer looming closer.

Is that one Cait?

He heard a humming sound, and he looked up. A Shimmer-suit fell towards him, landing with thudding crunch in the rock.

"That fancy hammer isn't moving very much." Sevika's voice echoed from the suit. "Too green for this, huh?"

Jayce just nodded, a lump in his throat. His hammer sunk to the ground. He watched Vi as she fought several of them, almost effortless. *How did I think I could—*

"*Look at me.*" Jayce met her eyes. They were hard and steady as granite. "The Enforcers are getting their shit together over there, do you hear me? They're forming a line, and are about to start really shooting." His whole world tunnelled down to just Sevika's face. "We need you to do something about the fog."

The fog. "What can I even— fuck, how should I know?"

"We need to clear the air so we can see the target. There's big old brains in that skull of yours, Jayce. We have all this tech that you built. *Think*."

"Viktor and I built it together, I need him—"

"What a load of shit," Vi snapped from beside him. Her Hex-glove landed heavy on his shoulder. "*You* marched into the Lanes with some crystals and a promise. So. How're you gonna clear the air, jawline?"

His terrified gaze met her calm one.

Clear the air.

He clamped his eyes shut. He stopped constantly scanning the environment. Sevika and Vi would defend him from attacking Enforcers.

I can't do it, I—

Wait. The hammer's blast. If I just dial up the repulsion wavelength...

Jayce knelt beside the hammer head, pulling an etcher from his toolbelt. He began digging fresh runes desperately around its shaft. His hands trembled hard, and he dropped the etcher in the dust. He scooped it up again.

Shit, did I think of everything? His brain almost whirred in his head.

Come on, Jayce. He heard Viktor's voice beside him. His partner. Just like any other day in the lab, when Jayce got worked up about an equation, unable to determine why it wouldn't work. Viktor's deep amber eyes would meet his, always so sure of him. *Think it through,* he would say. *One more time.* You *have the answer.*

He gasped, and scrambled for the handle. He adjusted it, twisting this and that. *There we go*.

Jayce pulled himself to his feet, tuning into the battle around him. Sevika was one on side if him and Vi on the other, holding back a clump of Enforcers. Jayce squinted, and saw a dark shadow a few meters before them, a line of something stretching across the cavern. *What is that?*

Let's find out.

He hauled up the hammer and pointed it at the centre of the ceiling. With a shout, he pulled the handle. A beam shot out, forming a giant ball of blue light. It hovered at the heart of the

cavern. The fighting around him faltered as everyone turned to look.

Then, the light burst outwards, a bubble that expanded and pushed all gas and dust particles with it to the cavern walls. It left the fighters untouched, and Jayce was grateful for his goggles as the grit blew past him.

The cavern air cleared completely. *Possibly for the first time ever*, Jayce realised with a start. *We really can improve conditions down here—*

He shook his head. *Not the time, Jayce. You did it. Think about the rest later.*

In the lingering glow of the Hexblast, the dark shadow ahead of them became clear. A line of Enforcers, locked shield to golden shield, was approaching the Zaunite fighters. The last few straggling Enforcers fell back, and were absorbed into their ranks. Jayce spotted several sharpshooters, protected behind the shields, trained on them. Shots began to pepper around them all. The Zaunites scrambled for cover behind rocks, shields, and Shimmer-suits. Sevika crouched with her back to the line, giving Jayce and Vi somewhere to huddle out of the line of fire.

Jayce peeked out to scan the ranks. And he didn't know how he knew, but that gun in the centre? Her face covered completely by mask and eyewear? That was Cait. Maybe it was the cock of her head as she spotted him, too, or the slight break in the line as she faltered. He was frozen, staring. *Cait*. Shit

What the fuck happens now? What do we do?

There was a zip of pink light, and Jinx's braids swirled around her as she appeared beside them.

"They really pulled in as many blue-bellies as they could!" Her eyes glittered above the gas mask. "They're gonna fire with

everything they got. Not that those pathetic little rockets of theirs can fire with much of anything!"

"How many bugs in place, Jinx?" asked Vi.

"I got most of 'em. It was easier when I could just dash around as they grappled us. I don't think I can go back in there when they're all lined up like that."

"Most should be good," Vi muttered. "Good work, sis."

"I know it was!" Vi shot her a look. "Sorry," Jinx muttered, though couldn't stop herself from rolling her eyes.

Then she turned to him. "Alright, jawline, you've got the button, right?"

He finally broke his gaze away from Cait.

I have no choice.

"Yeah, right here—"

A figure broke away from the Zaunite fighters beside them. Tiny, scrambling wildly over the rocks, she dashed forwards. Somehow, every shot missed her. *How did she even get into the mines?*

"No!" Jinx's scream was gutteral.

She must have snuck in, she knows these fissures better than anyone.

Isha tripped on something and fell, bouncing up immediately back to her feet, and running on. In one hand, she grasped something grenade-like, full to the brim with blue gemstones.

Jayce dropped the hammer. He moved faster than he could think. He saw Vi lunge for Jinx, her gauntlet clamping down on Jinx's elbow, pinning her in place despite all her Shimmer. But Vi didn't see him until it was too late.

Jayce ran forwards. Enforcer bullets fell around him, missing him so far. Isha was just ahead of him, clutching the grenade desperately to her chest. She glanced back over her shoulder.

She sped up when she saw him, a determined look in her big eyes. *She wants to save us.*

Jayce ran faster than ever before. He looked up, and found Cait's blank, metal eyes again. He knew she was holding her fire. The only reason he knew was because he was still moving, as was Isha.

"*She's a child!*" The cry ripped from his chest. It echoed in the cavern, cutting through the gunfire. He stared desperately at the long row of Enforcers. And as his heart and stomach contracted in fear, he realised he still hoped to reach them. He'd grown up with these people. Cait was holding back. Surely, surely, they wouldn't.

"*Don't shoot, she's a child!*" he cried again.

"Jawline, you idiot!" he heard Jinx's sob behind him.

He saw Cait's gunpoint waver, then drop slightly. *Yes.*

Then, another shot zipped out from the gun beside her. He almost saw its path. Straight at Isha's head.

He tried to dive forwards, anything, to stop it, but he was too far—

A blue glow burst out from Isha's helmet, forming a bubble for a fraction of a second. The bullet deflected, burying itself in the floor.

Isha stopped, and turned her back on the Enforcer line. She put her hands on her hips, and smiled smugly at Jayce.

You have got to be kidding. How the hell did she do that?

"Isha," he sobbed. He scrambled for her, and crushed her in his arms. "Isha."

She tried to wriggle free with a grunt.

"Wait, wait, wait, please, wait, we have a plan, *wait*—" he babbled as he reached into his coat. His fingertips fumbled for the remote and its button. A bullet buzzed inches from him.

He looked up at the Enforcers, and felt hate pool in his gut. He looked directly at Cait.

He pressed down.

All down the line, dots of blue began to glow. Small gadgets lit up, clamped onto Enforcer armour, helmets, ankles, and weapons. After a moment, their feet left the ground. The Hextech, deposited by Jinx as she'd zipped through the battle, removed all tether of gravity from anyone it was affixed to.

Most of the Enforcer line began to float into the air. They floundered, guns drifting from their hands, then falling. Shocked cries filled the air as the line disintegrated in seconds. The remaining few who hadn't been tagged by Jinx and the gadgets reached up, trying to grab on to them and pull them back down.

Jayce could see Caitlyn floating a meter from the ground. She trembled, terrified. Her precious gun left her hands. *Good.*

Isha giggled. Jayce gave a shaky laugh.

"Good one, huh?" She nodded, and sheepishly handed him the grenade. He took it and pulled it apart as quickly as he could.

"Come on. We'll talk about this later." He picked her up despite her cry, and ran back to Vi, Jinx, and Sevika.

Jinx flashed to him the second Vi's grasp loosened, sobbing as she pulled Isha from him. She clutched her tight.

"You did good, bud," Vi said, her voice wavering a little.

"Are you ready for the next part?" Sevika asked darkly. "Someone else can do it if you can't."

Jayce turned to face the Enforcers. He couldn't help but smile as he took in the sight of Piltover's finest, thrashing and yelling in midair. Some of them were several meters up by now.

"No," he said softly. His thumb rested on the button, and once

more, he pressed down.

The bugs winked out.

Enforcers crashed to the ground like boulders. Strangled cried filled the cavern as some dropped onto their friends, surely crushing bones.

Where did Cait land, is she— But he couldn't see among the mass of groaning, blue-clad bodies.

"Okay, let's finish this off," Vi said. She took a few steps forwards. Her fists glowed brighter than ever as she squared off against the Enforcers.

Jayce scrambled for his belt. He pulled out a large, round, disc-shaped gadget. He twisted at the dials, frowning as he calibrated, looking up to assess the cavern size before tweaking it again. He pressed the button.

A crackling blue wall of light spread forth, covering their whole side of the cavern. It encased every Zaunite in its protection. Jayce breathed out as it reached the distance he had set. Good, no one left out, and it didn't reach the Enforcers.

"Piltover scum!" Vi cried out. Her voice echoed in the large chamber, and Enforcers turned their heads. "We give you one minute to collect everyone you can carry and get *out of our mines.* Or else, we will bring the rocks down on your heads and *bury you alive*." She smashed her fist into her other hand. It let off a boom and a flash of light. "This is Zaun! Don't you *dare* set foot here again!"

The Enforcers scrambled into action, scooping up anyone who can walk. They rushed for the exit, beating a shameful retreat back to topside.

Cait wobbled to her feet. Jayce watched her take a step gingerly, then lift up another Enforcer and sling their arm over her shoulder as they limped out. Her face turned to his for a

brief moment.

But all he could see was the mask.

"Do I— do I set a timer?" he said to Sevika. "Before we detonate?" Jinx had laid plenty of explosives in the ceiling, just in case.

She snorted, the sound distorted through her suit. "Don't take this the wrong way, but you crack me up sometimes, jawline."

Jayce gave a nervous laugh, more spurred on by the adrenaline in his system than anything else.

"We're not actually giving them a minute. Caving in half the damn mine would be a pain to clear up, even if we're safe under your forcefield thing. Better to just spook them instead. Besides, they need to go tell their councillor friends about how scary we are. Need survivors for that."

Councillor friends...and councillor families, Jayce thought. *Cait will tell Cassandra everything.* The adrenaline rush was starting to come down, leaving him shaky and cold. He crouched to the ground and watched the last Enforcers flee. Emotions churned in his chest as he thought of her. He didn't know what to think, where to start.

Suddenly, a small figure ran into him. Isha's arms wrapped around his large chest, and her miner's helmet bumped into him.

He cradled her. "Don't ever, ever, ever do something like that again."

Jinx flashed up on his other side and knelt there. Her hand gripped his shoulder like a vice.

"Thank you," she whispered. "Thank you thank you thank you…"

They stayed that way for a long moment. Vi walked up beside them, still watching the Enforcer retreat closely in case

of trouble.

"I'm sorry," Jayce croaked to her. "I froze up."

She shook her head. "We put you in too fast. It was a bad call on my part." Vi nodded her head to the last few Enforcers as they disappeared through the exit. "Besides, look what you did today. They're scared shitless. And I don't know of any casualties on our side. You did what you said you'd do, Jayce. Zaun is one step closer."

Jayce could only nod. He didn't feel the words, not yet. Too many thoughts in his head. Exhaustion crashed into him like a wave.

Isha wriggled in his arms, breaking from Jayce's grasp. Jinx reached over and swiped the helmet from her head.

"Now, how the heck did you rig that up, you little menace?" she said, peering inside and inspecting the glowing gemstone there.

Isha just giggled.

III

Act III - INTERLUDE

15

Viktor

Viktor chopped the vegetable in front of him sightlessly, grunting as he almost sliced off his own fingertips again.

"Viktor," Ekko said as he leaned over a row of pots, tiny green leaves poking through the soil. "Don't you think that's enough potatoes?"

He shot him a glare. "Don't you think that's enough seedlings?"

"There's a lot of Zaunites fighting out there."

Viktor just shook his head. "I was under the impression that you were meant to be resting while you were off the front lines?"

"I find this shit very restful!" Ekko stuck his finger into the soil with a frown, muttering under his breath about schedules as he watered the row.

Viktor sighed and reached for another potato. "They should be back by now."

"I don't think I've ever done a mission where we got back on

time. Or where something doesn't go a little wrong. And we always figured it out."

Viktor dropped the knife with a clatter. "This isn't a mission, it's a *war*."

"Yeah, I know." Frustration flashed across his face. "Waiting fucking sucks."

Then finally, finally, they heard the sound they'd been waiting for. A faint hum. Viktor looked sharply at the Firelight tunnels. Ekko leapt for his board. He zoomed off, and met Scar just as he emerged. They flew down to the ground towards Viktor, speaking quickly.

He pushed up from his chair, and reached blindly for the cane, stumbling out to meet them. *Scar looks okay. Some blood. No haunted look in his eyes from seeing everyone he knows and loves dead...I don't think.*

Scar hopped lightly from the board.

"Is it— did it—" Viktor walked as fast as he could, brace whirring.

"It went smooth as anything, my friend," he said with a grin. Viktor felt the breath leave his body. Ekko pulled him into a tight hug.

"They're okay," he murmured into Viktor's shoulder. He nodded after a moment. *They're okay.*

A few more Firelights appeared, carrying wounded. Ekko flew off to help. Singed came down from his medical rooms, and sat them down in the common areas. Viktor tried to assist him, but after a few minutes, Singed waved him away.

"Your hands and your mind are unsteady, my boy. Go wait for him."

Viktor sighed and found a seat.

It took half an hour before Ekko reappeared. A tall man

clung to him on the board, bearing his hammer. Viktor's chest crumbled at the sight.

Jayce leapt from the board when it was still several meters from the ground, dropping the hammer and breaking into a run.

Viktor rushed to him. "Jayce, *lásko*, you'll rebreak that damn ankle if you jump like that, how could you, how *could you—"*

Jayce swept him up in his arms. He crushed Viktor to him, not enough to hurt him, never. Viktor breathed in his smell, searching for it under the fumes of toxic chem-fog. Jayce's chest swelled as he did the same, armour digging into him.

"*Queridi*, I missed you," he mumbled into Viktor's hair.

"You *missed me*? You run off and leave me to worry and then have the audacity to tell me you *missed me?"* Viktor's voice trembled.

"Hush," Jayce breathed, and he pulled back to smile at him.

"Sorry," Viktor murmured. He pulled Jayce's face to his in a desperate kiss. He would never get enough of the taste of him under his tongue, not if he kissed him every day for the rest of their lives.

"You're not hurt?" Viktor asked desperately.

Jayce shook his head, kissing his cheek.

"Did you…" *hurt anyone?* He peeked at the hammer over his shoulder. No signs of blood.

Jayce pulled back, and Viktor saw shame flash in his eyes. "No. I, um— I froze."

"Oh, *lásko."*

"I mean, I did…well, I saved Isha." Jayce ran a hand sheepishly through his hair.

"*Isha?* What in the pits was a *child* doing in the middle of a *battle*?"

"She snuck into the mines, I had to run out in front of the Enforcers to reach her—"

"Jayce, you *blbec,* don't you know you could have been shot!" Viktor's voice cracked. His fingers dug into Jayce's jaw more firmly than he intended. Jayce surged forward and kissed him. Viktor clutched at his face, drinking in his partner.

They finally parted. Jayce's eyes lit up. "But I used the hammer blast to clear the chamber! I increased the repulsion wavelength by about 25 times, it cleared the air completely."

Viktor frowned as his mind worked, exrapolating the equations.

"Ah, yes. Clever. How long did it take you to figure that out?"

Jayce blushed a little. "Well…about…I don't know, time goes weird in battle."

"Approximate, please, Jayce."

"…less than a minute?"

Viktor just shook his head. "I love you, you silly, crazy man, *gods* never do this again."

"Viktor—"

"I know, I know. It's alright. Just…always come back, okay?"

Jayce kissed him softly. "I will."

* * *

Later that night, they walked down one of the Lanes, holding hands. There was no way the Firelight compound could hold all the celebrating Zaunites, so an impromptu street party had sprung up. The people who ran the weekly free food markets pulled out their tables, and they gradually filled with food and

drink, brought straight from people's kitchens to share.

The Firelights agreed to keep watch over the bridges and Piltover, to warn them of any immediate reprisal. But as Vi said; "we kicked their fucking asses. It'll take at least one damn night for them to figure out what to do next." First thing in the morning, they agreed on a meeting between everyone who gave a damn about the future of Zaun.

But tonight, they would celebrate.

Jayce and Viktor wandered towards the Last Drop. They walked past clumps of miners chatting with chem-thugs, laughing wildly. The usual neon glow of the Lanes lit up the street, but Viktor smiled to see a few of their new Hextech lights had been throw up as well, no doubt by one of the apprentices. They hovered in the centre of the street, untethered, giving off a gentle blue glow.

Further down, a makeshift stage had been set up on the street. Gert had clearly dragged her equipment out from the Last Drop, a few speakers and a mic or two. She was jamming with her band, something loud and thrashy. Viktor raised his eyebrows as he saw Silco leaning against a wall opposite them with a forced air of nonchalance. He was watching the stage closely, and Viktor saw his fingers tapping along on his thigh.

He nudged Jayce and nodded towards Silco. "Vi told me she found old photos of Silco in Vander's things at the Last Drop. He used to be quite the rockstar. If he gets up on stage tonight, I'll die happy."

"Hm? Yeah, fine," Jayce said. Viktor frowned, turning to see a faraway look in his eyes.

"Jayce?"

"Yeah?" He focused on Viktor. Fear shadowed his face. "Hey, do you think they need reinforcements at the lookouts? Extra

eyes can't hurt."

"*Jayce*." Viktor pulled him to a stop and drew him closer. "I'm sure they have it covered."

"Mm." His muscles were tight under his skin. "What about someone keeping watch at the bridge, though? They might decide to strike while we're—"

"Listen to me," he said. "You fought today—"

"You fought, too! The miners defended themselves with *our* weapons. You've been working around the clock for months now."

Viktor scratched his fingers through Jayce's beard. Some of the tension left him as he closed his eyes. "Yes, fine. We fought. And now, we live. It is just as important, if not more so. Look."

Viktor nodded towards the stage, where Gert was screaming her lungs out. Sevika and Vi were sitting front row, blowing out clouds of purple Shimmer. Gert knelt on the stage and reached out her hand to Vi. She shouted in protest, but with a push from Sevika, climbed up to join them. Gert and Vi sang into one mic, though kept breaking into laughter, losing track of the song.

Jayce watched them, and some of the fear bled away to tenderness. Viktor's hand smoothed to his neck, grounding him gently.

Jayce gave a long sigh. "You're right. Of course, you're right." Those warm eyes met his in the neon glow of the Lanes. "You look beautiful tonight, you know that?" His hand fell to Viktor's waist.

"Do I?" He gave a coy smile. Viktor wore a tight dress, with a harness of delicately arranged straps accentuating his waist. His brace peeked out of the skirt, as always. It was a new one Jayce had just finished building after months of careful work,

waving Viktor off when he pointed out that there were more important projects. Hexstones were embedded artistically into the scrolling metalwork design. With it, Viktor could walk for hours without pain, though not very fast yet. He tilted his head. "I just had this lying around."

Jayce's eyes twinkled. "Oh really?" he murmured. He pulled Viktor in for a kiss.

Viktor lost track of time, content to stand here forever, just sinking into his partner, his lips, his tongue—

"Gods, in the street? Old people these days have no respect."

"We would never, would we, little man?"

Viktor broke away from Jayce with a snort, and turned to see Jinx and Ekko sauntering up to the two of them.

"Jinx," Viktor said in a rush. "Thank the gods you're alright."

"'Course I am, buddy," she said with a cocky grin. "I did goddamn amazing, too." Ekko kissed her temple.

"How's topside looking?" Jayce asked, some nervousness creeping into his voice again.

"All clear," said Ekko. "I swear the city looks sadder than usual, but that's probably just wishful thinking. Scar just took over."

"And Isha?"

"Tucked in," said Jinx. She gave a worried frown. "Let's cook up a tracker for her or something, I don't want to think about what trouble she might get up to next time."

"Troublemakers are the worst, hmm," Ekko said with a grin.

"Yes, only if you'll wear one, *Powder*," Viktor raised an eyebrow. Jinx punched his arm lightly, then Ekko.

"You can't do that to a cripple!" he gasped, but she just cackled at him.

On stage, Gert and Vi finished singing, and Vi leapt down, collapsing next to Sevika. Gert fiddled with the deck. A new

song began to play over the speakers, with a driving beat.

Jinx turned to Ekko, pink eyes alight. "This song!"

He smiled at her. "Shall we?"

"Wait, I'm wearing the new—"

He gasped. "Yes, let's show them."

Jinx bounced on her feet, grinning at Viktor. "I made a new thing. You're gonna love it."

Ekko whipped out his board and took to the air. Jinx crouched for a moment. Her clunky boots glowed began to glow, blue and pink. Viktor looked more closely. He smiled to himself when he realised that she had built a Hextech gemstone into each heel, but had added the pink lights herself for aesthetic effect. *Of course.*

Jinx zipped into the air in a flash of pink light. She reappeared for a moment, then her boots lit up with a controlled burst of power. It kept her hovering in the air beside Ekko, before she zipped again. With the bursts from her boots and the Shimmer in her veins, she could fly just as well as Ekko.

Jayce shook his head with a smile. "That girl is a marvel." Viktor dropped a kiss to his hand.

Ekko and Jinx danced around each other in the air, hovering high above their heads. Other Zaunites along the street turned to look.

Mais ma meilleure ennemie c'est toi,

Fuis-moi, le pire c'est toi et moi.

They darted around each other, half-dancing, half-teasing. Ekko lunged for her braid, ready to tug on it, but Jinx was too fast. She flashed behind him and dropped a peck on his cheek. He spun, but she disappeared with a cackle.

Mais si tu cherches encore ma voix,

Oublie-moi, le pire c'est toi et moi.

They clasped hands, laughing as they swung each other around, braids swirling.

* * *

The night played on. Viktor and Jayce found some good stools and sat to watch, Jinx and Ekko having darted off on some adventure. Different people came up to Gert's stage. Some sang, others just spoke. Some were eloquent, and others blunt. Viktor could feel something wonderful growing around them. The Zaunites were vibrant in a way he had never felt before. He spotted one of Ekko's seedlings balanced on top of a speaker, juddering with the bass.

"Hello, my dears," came a sultry voice beside them.

Viktor turned. "Lest!" He smiled at the tall, elegant woman.

"Viktor," she said warmly. "It's been too long."

"And who's fault is that? You've been busy slinking around the Council halls."

"Doing the good work," she reminded him. "As if you haven't been cooped up with this one for months, being mad fucking scientists. If you know what I mean." She raised a furred eyebrow at Jayce, who blushed.

"I make no apologies," Viktor said.

"Good," she said, her slitted eyes warm. Then she sobered. "I heard about how well things went today, and your little gadgets made all the difference. Thank you, both. Truly." Jayce's blush deepened.

"Of course," Viktor just murmured. Her hand rested on his arm, and he patted her long fingers. "Now, are you getting up

there?"

"Oh, I couldn't," she said with a coy smile.

"I remember last time you sang at the Last Drop," Jayce said. "I think I teared up."

She smiled at him. "Such a charmer, Jayce."

"Go on, Lest," Viktor said.

There was a round of applause as someone finished up. She rolled her eyes. "Well, if you insist."

Lest walked gracefully towards the stage. She murmured something to Gert, who grinned and nodded, reaching for her acoustic guitar. Lest perched on a stool. She crossed her legs beneath her slim dress.

She began to sing, something warm and crooning. Jayce leaned into him and pressed a light kiss to his shoulder.

Then Jayce straightened up with a frown. Something had caught his eye down the street. Viktor turned to look. He cocked his head at a slim, hooded figure, walking gracefully.

"Is that who I think it is?"

Jayce said nothing, staring intently. He rose from his seat, walking towards them. Viktor followed.

"…Mel?" Jayce said hesitantly as they approached.

She pulled back her hood a little, and Viktor saw those gold flecks on her cheek in the streetlights.

"Hello, boys."

"*Mel*," Jayce said, shocked. "What are you doing here?"

"Well, something tells me you're aware of the events that took place in the Undercity today?" she said. Though her words were sardonic as usual, something about them rang hollow.

"We may know something about that, yes," Viktor replied, raising his eyebrows.

"What are you doing *here?*" Jayce said again.

She paused. "I…I'm not sure." Viktor was intrigued by the hesitance in her voice.

Jayce stepped closer, his hands twitching towards her. "How did you even find us?"

"I just retraced my steps to the market you showed me, then followed the music. I wasn't looking for you, exactly, Jayce, I just…" She looked towards the stage, and her lips pressed into a line. "Is that Lest?"

Viktor grinned a little. "It is."

"Friend of yours?"

"Oh, yes."

She gave him a long look. "And how deep is she, exactly, in your plotting?"

Viktor just shrugged.

Mel watched the graceful woman for another few moments. "Damn," she said finally. Viktor saw Jayce jerk in surprise as the curse left her lips. "I don't like being played."

Viktor chuckled. "Apologies, Councillor. It's nothing personal."

She gave a small sigh. "Please, just Mel."

"Mel, why come down here?" Jayce said. Her eyes flicked to him.

"When I heard…well, I was…glad to hear that there weren't any causalities. On your side, anyway."

The silence hung heavy between them for a moment.

"And on your side?" Viktor pressed.

"I'm not sure which side that is anymore," she murmured. "I tried to stop this, but…" A troubled frown creased her perfect brows. "They overruled me."

"Ah, Piltover. Always the shining example of order and respect," Viktor said bitterly.

Mel's eyes met his, and flashed with anger. "It's somewhat possible that the entire thing is a *farce*." She hissed the last word.

Jayce looked at Viktor. *I told you we could trust her*, he read in his partner's eyes.

Viktor frowned a little. *One impulsive visit to the Undercity does not a rebel make*.

Jayce just gave a slight pout.

Damn puppy eyes. I love them.

"Would you like to stay, Mel?" Viktor said finally.

Mel looked at him for a long moment, then at Jayce.

"Yes," she said simply. "Thank you."

"Good," Jayce said with a grin at Viktor. He ran off to fetch them some drinks from a table nearby.

* * *

Lest finished her song, to enthusiastic applause. After a modest wave of the hand, she began a new one, a little more sensual than the last, to loud woops and whistles.

Sevika moved through the crowd, and spotted Jayce and Viktor. She made her way over to them.

"You did good, boys." She raised her glass to them, downing it in one. "That suit moved like a dream."

"I'm amazed it isn't a smouldering wreck, knowing how well you look after your arm," Viktor said with a smirk.

She clapped Jayce on the shoulder. "I guess I just—" She cut off when she saw Mel, and looked her up and down.

"Hey, there."

Mel drew herself up tall. She said nothing.

"Uh—" Jayce stuttered. "Sevika this is…this is Mel."

She glared at him. "*Medarda?*"

"…yes."

"There's a fucking councillor here and you didn't do something about it?"

"Excellent. You know of me, then?" Mel said smoothly.

Sevika stepped closer. She was only an inch taller, but it was enough to look down at the defiant councillor. "The hell are you doing here?"

Mel didn't flinch. "Well, we had a victory today. I thought I would come to Zaun to celebrate."

Sevika's lip curled. "Look, princess, you've helped us out. Thanks, or whatever. But you're on the goddamn council. Forgive me if I find it a little suspicious that you're sniffing around here tonight. Right after we smashed Piltover's finest into chem-dust."

Mel met Sevika's vicious glare. "I'm here because they should never have *touched* those mines, or Zaun. I won't stand by and watch Piltover do this."

"You *are* Piltover," Sevika spat.

"I am *me.*" Her voice was sharp as a knife.

Sevika frowned. "You need to get out of here."

Mel sighed. "Fine. You don't believe that I'm committed?"

She reached up, and pulled her cloak apart. It fell to the ground around her.

Mel stood tall, in a simple black dress that hugged her figure. Gold plates traced over her shoulders, her neck, ears, and cheeks. They intrigued Viktor. *Jewellery? But there something about them...*Among the neon lights and grime of the Lanes, she stood out like a beacon. Heads were already turning around them.

"Shit," Sevika muttered, looking her up and down.

"Sevika, was it?" Mel said. She stepped forwards, her face inches from the tall woman's. "I'll renounce my position on the Council right now. I'll declare the Enforcers' actions an atrocity. Gods, I'll move down here and learn to build explosives if that's what it takes for you to believe that I'm *all in.*"

Sevika's eyes narrowed.

"But I rather think you want me on the Council, for now. I'm slightly more useful there." Mel raised her eyebrow.

Sevika just looked at her for a long, long moment. Finally, she snorted, taking a step back.

"Very dramatic. You'd better put that cape back on, princess. You got a point, you're useful on the Council right now. Don't want any of them hearing you were wandering around the Lanes tonight."

Jayce knelt to the ground, collecting the cloak and handing it to Mel. His eyes were reverent. *Ah, Jayce.*

"And," Sevika said. "If you're really going to help Zaun, you probably shouldn't assume we're all bomb-loving terrorists."

"I mean, some of us are," Jayce mumbled.

"And we love them very much," Viktor said with a smile.

Mel's lips quirked. "I'll note that down," she said as she settled the cloak around her face again.

Jayce cleared his throat. "There's a meeting tomorrow—"

"Jayce," Sevika hissed. Viktor shook his head. *Too much, too soon.*

"We don't have *time* for this," he said, rubbing a hand over his face. There was a pain there that Viktor had not seen in him before. *Oh, Jayce. You saw too much today.* "We can't afford to turn her away. She wants to help." He looked pleadingly at Viktor.

He sighed. "And who are you to decide that she's not allowed in, Sevika?" he said quietly.

Sevika threw him a glare. "Don't pull that shit."

"By 'that shit', are you referring to our entire philosophy as a movement?"

"You're goddamn right I am."

Sevika was quiet for a long moment, watching Mel, who stood serene.

"Fine," she grumbled finally. "We'll let her into the inner sanctum and everything. I guess."

Mel smiled. "Thank you, my dear."

"Don't fucking push it."

Mel's smile widened. She leaned forward, and plucked Jayce's drink from his hand, who spluttered. She offered her own glass to Sevika.

"Come now. To new friends?"

Sevika stared at her. Finally, the corners of Sevika's lips twitched. She reached for the glass.

"To smooth-talking princesses," she muttered as she drank.

Viktor laughed into his hand.

16

Vi

Vi collapsed against the tree root with a groan. She rubbed her shoulder, aching where it had smashed into the fissure wall…gods, was the fight only yesterday? The Shimmer from Singed had taken the edge off, but she still had a hangover pounding in her temples.

"Does our coffee usually taste this good?" she grumbled, drinking deeply from the chipped mug.

"Nope," Ekko said. He sat straddling his board, hovering at around shoulder height beside a huge sheet of metal, about a storey tall, leaning against the Firelight wall. His paintbrush swiped over it, painting out some message about blue-bellies and where to shove them.

Several of the giant metal sheets were strewn around the Firelight commune, and a few other people were clustered around the yard, painting away. Many had the tired, contented look of a party well-enjoyed out in the Lanes last night. Others

had a haunted shadow in their eyes, nursing bandages.

Jinx snickered and perched on the root beside her. "Surprised you still got any voice left, sis, after all that singing. You're gonna need it in a bit, though."

"Shit," she muttered. "When's the meeting?"

Jinx shrugged. "In a bit."

"Thanks. Helpful."

Jinx just grinned. She nudged a plate on the ground with the toe of her boot. "Do you want mine? Not hungry."

Vi reached for the cold eggs, sighing gratefully as she took a bite. "Fanks."

They were silent for a few minutes as Vi ate. *Who's even gonna be there?* she wondered. *How are the chem-barons and Firelights going to get on? And if Bool agrees to anything, I'll be amazed. Not to mention that councillor. That'll be a hard pill for any of the Zaunites to swallow. What were they thinking, inviting her?*

And they're all going to be asking me what we're gonna do now.

What the hell am I gonna say?

"I can almost hear your little brain whirring from here, sis," Jinx said.

"Brain's not little," she muttered.

Jinx snorted. "Fine. It's probably a pretty damaged, though. One fist too many."

"Shut up."

Jinx just poked her shoulder with her boot. "C'mon," she said. "What is it?"

Vi rubbed a hand over her forehead. "Oh, nothing. I just have to get a room of the most different people you can think of to all agree on the next steps of our giant-ass revolution."

Jinx cackled. "Yeah. Sevika and I are placing bets on who storms out first."

"Thanks, team," she muttered.

Jinx leapt down from her perch, sitting crossed legged beside her. She nudged her knee.

"Sis, we won yesterday."

Vi shrugged. "I guess."

"No, we *really* won. Did you see those blue-bellies floating? " A wide, savage grin spread over her face. "I swear I was about to see a shit float out of someone's pants legs."

Vi snorted

"Look, the fact that all those people are going to even be in the same room talking about Zaun is a fucking miracle. Because *you* wrangled them. Without even blowing anyone up. Without even *threatening* to blow anyone up. Silco can't even pull that off, beats me how you managed it."

Vi just shook her head. "We couldn't have gotten Silco in without you talking to him."

Jinx scoffed. "He's just a sad old puppy who needs a bit of love. But Sevika? She's stubborn as cave rocks. And she's so loyal to you, it's embarrassing."

Vi frowned down into the dirt beneath them. "I just…I don't know about today. Vander would know what to say. He'd know what to do next."

"No, he wouldn't."

Vi shot her a look.

"He wouldn't! He was too soft to ever get where we are, because he thought that lying down and playing dead for topside would protect us." She nudged her sister. "You get that we need to fight to protect."

"I feel like you do more fighting than me these days," she murmured. "That mansion thing was great. Sorry I snapped at you about it."

"I guess you rubbed off on me," Jinx said. She looked down at the ground too, her knees curled up to her chin.

A smile tugged at Vi's mouth. "Yeah?"

"Yeah. I know, gross." Vi nudged her knee.

"So…what do *you* think we do next?"

Jinx looked at her, a wry look in her pink eyes. "Dunno. But maybe you should ask everyone that, rather than trying to save us all by yourself."

Vi rolled her eyes, and felt the urge to snap back at her. But then she sighed. *She's right, though, isn't she? This isn't just about me. Which means...it's not all down to me.*

She nudged Jinx again, but this time it was gentle. "Look, even if this all falls apart and the Enforcers squash us all and we ruin this city forever…at least we got to have this. I didn't know if…we ever would."

"Yeah. I didn't either." Her pink eyes were a little empty as she stared into space. "I wasn't really someone who could do this…looking-after-people thing. Until recently." She shrugged, the nonchalance forced. "Maybe I'll go back to being that again. Y'know, just doing whatever I want to feel good."

Vi laid a hand on her forearm. "I'll still be here if you do. You'll find your way out again. You'll come back to us."

Jinx tensed a little under her hand, but stayed.

"Always with you, sis."

* * *

They chose to meet before the mural of those lost, seated on tree roots, old stools, and pieces of scrap metal. Vi stood near

the wall, watching Zaun slowly gather. Silco eyed off Finn, Renni, and a few other barons. Lest, Babette, and Margot sat chatting happily. Bool and Sevika both stood with arms crossed, pointedly not looking at each other. Forma was gathered with a few other miners, still holding her Hextech weapon. Gert gently sparred with a friend. Scar nursed his child, as Renni's son sat tinkering. A few other Zaunites, shop-owners, parents, thieves, merchants, tinkerers, and troublemakers all sat nearby. More than a hundred Zaunites filled the Firelight home. Vi knew many would take take word of today's gathering to their own people.

Her people were gathered near her. Jayce and Viktor sat close to one another, arguing quietly over some gadget. Jinx was braiding Isha's hair, who sat in her lap. Her own braids were so long that Isha had no problem braiding Jinx's at the same time, halfway down the long, blue strands. Ekko sat beside them, doing the other braid.

Vi shook her head, amazement washing over her as she looked out over everyone. She finally, really took it in.

I helped do this. She looked up at the mural, at Vander's kind eyes, and smiled back at him.

The elegant councillor stood before the mural. She had shed the heavy cloaks that hid her identity. Her slim dress showed off the golden plates of her figure. Her hair was a little less neat after a night sleeping on a Firelight bed, but otherwise, she was terrifyingly poised. *Jayce better be right about her,* Vi thought with a frown. *Or else we don't stand a chance.*

Mel looked up pensively at the faces in the mural. "This is rather wonderful. It's your work, you said?" She turned to look at Ekko.

He glanced up from Jinx's braid, and nodded once.

"This is a lovely shade of red, just here." She swept her fingers along a brush of paint. "In a matter of fact, it's a rather *rare* shade of red. Did you know that?"

"Uhh…" Ekko frowned.

"Noxian red, as a matter of fact."

Jayce looked up, cocking his head.

"I guess?" said Ekko.

"Now, there's a possibility that you used your Gates to buy this particular shade legitimately from Noxus itself." Mel's voice was still gentle, but her eyes pierced Ekko's. He was looking slowly more uncomfortable. Vi crossed her arms, seeing how Mel's lips twitched, and her own smile started to grow.

"But, would you believe, just a few weeks ago, Noxian red paint was stolen right from my home." She cocked her head. "You wouldn't know anything about that…Ekko, was it?"

Jinx giggled. Ekko looked half-angry, half-desperately-anxious. "Uh, yes, that's me, yep. Oh, but no! I don't know-"

"Ah, well," Mel cut him off smoothly. "I already purchased more. And you did use it very nicely." She let a small smile slip. Jayce and Viktor stifled their laughter. Ekko looked down into his lap, embarrassed.

"You used it pretty well, too," he muttered.

Vi saw something flicker in her hazel eyes, and her cheeks changed colour under the golden flecks.

"Thank you," she said quietly. Then, Mel's fierce gaze met hers.

"Well, Vi, shall we begin?"

Vi blinked. "Oh! Yeah, I guess we—"

"The Piltovian, trying to run our meeting for us?" Silco drawled. "How surprising." Renni and a few others grumbled in agreement. Mel's eyes flashed, but she kept her composure.

"I am not Piltovian," was all she said.

Vi stepped forwards, and made sure her voice carried.

"Yeah, Mel Medarda is on the Piltover council. But she's already done a lot to help Zaun, and she's committed to this fight. She's taking a big risk by being here today."

"More like we're the ones at risk," Bool said, glaring at Mel. "Pretty sure she's gonna run back up topside, tell them all our plans, and laugh about what trusting little sump-rats we are."

Mel's voice was carefully pitched to carry. "I assure you, although I will remain on the false Council as long as it is useful for the movement, I am loyal."

"Ah, your word. How comforting," Silco said, eyebrow raised.

"You really wanna talk about loyalty, Silco?" Sevika snapped. A few Firelights and other Zaunites glared, nodding. Silco just shot her an amused look.

"Enough." Vi said loudly. All eyes fell on her. "Look around you. We've got every corner of the Undercity in the same place. Look at *Zaun*." She was a little surprised when people actually listened, looking around, even the toughened barons. "We're going to squabble, and we're not gonna agree on everything today. But we have the same goal. *Get Piltover out*. Alright?"

She pinned Silco down with a glare, then Bool, then the other barons. They finally nodded. *Good. No threatening to blow anyone up to get them to cooperate. Today, at least.*

Vi looked out over the gathering. "Yesterday, we showed topside that we are not their underlings, and we would no longer let them use us for their own wealth. And, we showed them we're ready to defend ourselves *at all costs*." She saw Jinx grinning widely. "We're here today to plan what we do next, and what we want. As a people."

"No Enforcers on our streets!" someone yelled.

Vi nodded. "What else?"

"And let us cross the bridge whenever we want!" came a cry. "No more Enforcer searches."

"Open up Stillwater!" yelled another.

"Economic freedom," Silco said, sounding almost bored. But Vi met his gaze. There was a softness there, and his eyes flicked up to Vander before looking at her again. She thought he looked…proud, for just a moment. Something warmed in her chest.

"We make our own laws," Sevika growled. "We're our own people, we know what's best for us, not some council that've never set foot here." Her eyes flickered to Mel, who had the grace to look faintly embarrassed.

"I agree," she said. Sevika just nodded.

"And what're those laws gonna be, exactly?" said Finn, arms crossed. "Who's making them up? You? Vander's kid?"

Vi sighed. "I don't know," she said simply. "Tomorrow's problem. Why don't we actually make a Zaun before figuring out how we're gonna run it?"

To her surprise, Finn didn't argue, just shrugged and settled back.

"Nothing to add, Finn?" said Renni pointedly.

"Not really. Last night, there were no Enforcers in the Lanes. I don't remember the last time I got to walk around freely like that." He gave her a searching look. "Can't deny that you lot are getting results."

Vi looked down, smiling to herself.

"Well," Mel said slowly. "That's a rather reasonable list of demands, wouldn't you say?"

Silco nodded slightly, as did Sevika. No one else said anything.

"Total sovereignty for Zaun," said Vi with a sigh. "I guess that's all."

"So, we present these demands to Piltover," Forma spoke up. She gripped her weapon. "And prepare for their retaliation?"

"Yes," said Vi. "We can expect them to attack, and with everything they've got." Vi spoke to the crowd. "We will prepare for a fight, bigger than the one in the mines. We were thinking we'd cut off the bridge, the carriages, every entry point to Zaun. We defend the barricades against everything topside throws at us. With Hextech, we should manage it. The barricades stay until they agree unconditionally to our demands. Anyone who can hold a stick can help. And, anyone who can hold a bandage or a cooking ladle, or run messages, or hold the hands of those waiting, we ask that you step forwards, too. We need everyone." Vi paused for breath. "…unless anyone wants to do things another way," she finished lamely.

"Sounds good, kid," Bool growled. "When?"

"A few things are prepared to set up the blockades. But…we don't know when. Probably not today, that's all we can guess."

"I'll tell you as soon as I know," Mel said. Vi nodded.

"And how will these demands be presented to Piltover?" Silco said. "Paint them on the city walls?" Ekko snorted.

"Perhaps our golden messenger can pass it along," Sevika said, raising an eyebrow at Mel.

"No," said Mel, at the same time that Silco snapped, "absolutely not."

He stared at her. "No?"

"You deserve more than a messenger," Mel said. She lifted her chin as she met his gaze. "I can get several Zaunites in and out of there safely. Tell them yourselves."

"Good," Silco said with a curled lip.

Jinx gasped, and her eyes glowed pink as she looked at Silco. "Remember that time you had to pull Finn's head in?"

"Yes," Finn snapped, as he, Renni, and Margot all glared at Silco.

"Hmm," he said, cocking his head. "That's an idea."

"What's an idea?" asked Vi.

Jinx grinned at her. "Tell ya later, sis."

"Right." She rubbed her temple. "Well, that sounds like half a plan?"

"Sounds like a whole-ass plan, to me," said Ekko. Vi looked around. The people looked back, giving small nods.

She spoke up to the crowd around her. "So, we'll prepare our defence. Speak to a Firelight if you want to help, fight, or anything else. There's plenty of roles to go around. We'll let you know as soon as we find out when—"

There was a hum, and Vi looked up as a Firelight burst out of one of their pipes. They circled the tree, before flying down to land beside Ekko. They crouched and murmured to him. He looked at Vi, eyes wary, then at Jayce.

"Shit, is it now?" Vi said. *There's no way, they won't be ready,* we're *not ready-*

"No," Ekko said quickly. "Nothing like that. But…we should go. With you, jawline."

Jayce looked stunned. "Me? Why?"

"You've got a visitor."

17

Jayce

She was waiting on the street at the nondescript doorway that led to the Firelight home. Jayce snorted at her strategically ripped shirt and pants, the oil grease stains clearly dabbed on.

Subtle, Cait.

Caitlyn stood with arms crossed and glowered at the Firelight guarding her. She looked up as he and Ekko descended on his board, Vi following behind with the other Firelight. Though she looked angry, Jayce could see something else tightening her already angular face. *Desperation.*

Jayce hopped off the Firelight board and landed lightly. Caitlyn examined him head to toe as he approached. She took in the bruises visible through his clothes, and the fatigue from the battle that still lay heavy on his shoulders. She stared at his belt, where one of Ekko's deweighter discs glowed Hextech-blue.

"Gods, Jayce," she said, shaking her head. "Who are you?"

"How did you find this place?" he said, wary.

"I did my job," she snapped. "I investigated. It wasn't difficult to follow a Firelight back here. To the *terrorist base* where my *best friend lives*."

"You did your *job* very well yesterday, too, Piltie," Vi spat out. "When you pointed a gun at my family."

Caitlyn's searing blue gaze wavered as it met hers. "I didn't shoot," she said quietly.

"Then I guess you're a bad Enforcer," Vi said, crossing her arms. "Jayce, she has to get out of here."

"No!" Caitlyn cried. She looked at him. "Look…yesterday was a mistake. We should never have gone down there. But what the *hell* did you do to us?" She looked again at the Hextech gem. "It's you, isn't it? Who gave them the tech? You know, my friend died. Hit the floor head-first after you— you floated us into the air!"

Jayce crossed his arms slowly. "And what about the one that shot at me, and a child? Are they a friend of yours?"

Guilt flashed though her eyes. "No, they're not! That was a terrible error. I'm going to ensure that they are severely reprimanded—"

Vi rolled her eyes. "You don't get it, cupcake. You're telling me you've never shot at a sump-rat? Never beat up a kid in the Lanes? Fine, I believe you. But all your Enforcer friends have, I promise you. And I know none of them got *reprimanded*." She snorted.

Caitlyn's gaze stayed fixed on Jayce. "You're really doing it, aren't you? This isn't just about the mines, you're fighting all Piltover. Your own people! You're going to start a *war*, Jayce, and I don't know if you can win it."

He couldn't stop a smirk from flashing over his face. "We went just fine yesterday."

But Caitlyn looked even more scared. "No, you don't understand."

"Don't understand what, cupcake?" Vi stepped closer.

"Don't call me that," she snapped.

"You know something," said Vi.

Jayce narrowed his eyes. "Did Cassandra tell you something?"

"No!" Caitlyn protested. But she was always a terrible liar. "Even if she did, how could I tell you? You're…the enemy."

He thought he would feel more at the betrayed look in his friend's eyes. But he just couldn't get the blank Enforcer mask out of his head.

"Cait," he said softly. "You don't have to fight for them. You don't have to be one of them. Just quit."

"How can you say that? I have to defend Piltover!"

"How can you *defend* what they're doing to the Undercity?" Jayce said. "What *you're* doing? Come on, Cait. I know you. You care too much to be blinded by their bullshit."

"This was a mistake," she said bitterly.

"Yeah. I think you should go."

"Jayce," she said, pleading. "Don't do this. If I see you out there, when it all starts…I don't know what I'll do."

His heart ached as he looked at her. "I don't either," he said quietly.

Something flickered in her eyes. "There's something— I can't—" She looked away. "You're not safe, Jayce."

"What's coming, Caitlyn?" Vi said urgently.

She just shook her head.

Vi's face tightened. "Make sure she gets back up top," she said to the Firelight, who nodded.

"Wait," Jayce said, his voice cracking. There was something he hadn't been able to get out of his mind. "Can you…Caitlyn,

can you go to my…mom? Can you keep her somewhere safe?"

Caitlyn stared at him for a long time, as he looked at her. Dozens of emotions flitted through her bright eyes.

"And shall I tell her what has become of her son?" she said finally, her voice cold. "That he wants to destroy her city? Everything she loves?"

Vi rolled her eyes. "*Destroy* everything—!"

Jayce laid a hand on her arm, and Vi stopped. He couldn't meet Caitlyn's eyes. "No. I'll tell her…I don't know, one day. When it's safe, but…I can't yet. Will you…will you look after her anyway?"

"Fine, Jayce," she said, crossing her arms. "For Ximena."

Jayce nodded, looking down.

"Alright, cupcake," Vi growled. "Off you go. Wait for an invite next time, huh? Which'll be exactly never."

"You're insufferable," she snapped.

"Yeah," she said with a grin. "But at least I'm not naïve enough to think that Piltover will stop at *defending itself*."

"*Naïve*—?!"

"Oh yes. When they start planning to wipe out every last stinking sump-stain, don't come crying to us because you were wrong."

Doubt flashed through Caitlyn's eyes. But Jayce just turned away.

"Don't take this the wrong way," he said. "But I hope I don't see you around."

"I hope I don't, either," she said softly, as he walked back to the tree.

18

Mel

Mel stood in her spacious Council rooms. She leaned a hip against the large table, feeling the ache of a poor night's sleep on the hard Firelight bed. *Come on, Mel. Didn't Mother make you sleep on hard beds growing up exactly for this reason? So you'd never get this soft? Shake it off.*

She looked out over the city. *I think I can see Zaun from here.* She narrowed her eyes against the afternoon sun, trying to see if she could spot fortifications, or any Enforcer activity. But all seemed quiet at the bridges. *For now*.

A light knock came at the door. *Tap-tap, tap.* Elora's code. "Yes," she called out, and her friend slipped in.

"I just received word, Mel," she said. "Emergency Council meeting. Sunset. Salo is irate."

"Excellent," she murmured. "Perfect timing."

Elora walked excitedly up to the desk. "So how will we send the message?"

Mel smiled at her. "Let's see."

She reached down beneath her skirts, and untied a knot. A long string of Hextech gemstones unravelled from around her thigh. She laid it out on the desk.

"Now, Jayce said all I'd have to do is…" She lay the string of glowing stones into a circle at the centre of the table, the size of a small plate, with a disc the size of her thumbnail. She pressed the button once. A small, thin ring of light slowly expanded from the ring of stones. It pulsed softly, ready.

Mel looked around at her things on the table, and smiled as she reached for a small chunk of red Noxian clay. When ground into a powder and added to water, it was used to make its distinctive red pigment. *I wonder if the Firelight knows just how expensive that stolen paint was,* she thought to herself.

Mel placed it at the centre of the circle. She looked at Elora, giving her a nervous grin. Her closest friend was one of the only people who she allowed herself to be unsure around. Elora reached out and grasped her hand, eyes alight.

"Show me this Hextech, then," Elora said.

Mel reached for the disc, and pressed the button again. More rings of light sprung up from the circle of gemstones, enclosing the object in a dome. Tiny runes orbited the Noxian stone. It glowed brightly, then turned to pure blue light. It disappeared with a small flash. Elora gasped, hand pressed to her mouth.

They waited for half a minute, hands clenched tight.

Then the stones glowed again. The rings sprung up, and racing lights glowed faster and faster.

A tiny gear clattered to the table, one side painted Noxus red. Mel smiled to herself. Elora reached for it with trembling fingers.

"Excellent," Mel said. She reached for a blank scrap of paper,

no longer than her pinky. *Sunset today*, she wrote in her elegant script.

She dropped the paper in the centre of the stones. "We'll send the gear back as well," she said to Elora. "No reason to keep it on us."

Elora turned the gear over once more, before placing it on top of the paper. Mel pressed the tiny button. The objects flashed in the circle of runes, and disappeared.

"This technology…" Elora mused. "I'll admit, I had my doubts when you first shackled yourself to an unstable alliance of rebels. But…they will win, won't they?"

"Possibly," Mel frowned. "Though, we're missing something, Elora. Caitlyn knew things, according to Jayce, and Cassandra is too cany to throw the Enforcers at Zaun again without…" she trailed off. *Reinforcements.*

She shook her head. *Not possible.*

Mel reached out to dismantle the Hexgate – or Hexway, as Viktor was calling it, given that it wasn't much of a gate. But she paused, as rings sprung up from the gemstones once again. Runes circled the empty space, and she waited as they pulsed. Then the slip of paper reappeared on the table.

Mel picked it up and read her own words, then turned it over. Someone had scrawled something on the back in an untidy hand.

Take care –J

She smiled to herself. "Would you burn this?" she said to Elora, handing her the paper. As her friend dropped it in the fire, Mel picked up the string of gemstones. She looked carefully around the chamber for a place to hide it.

Now, to prepare my best acting skills.

* * *

"I hate to be right about this, but—"

"Oh, Salo, come now," Mel sighed. "You can be honest amongst friends. You're rather pleased to be correct, surely?"

He glared at her. "Friends, now, are we? Have you finally seen that I was *right,* and these violent animals are completely unreasonable?"

She didn't reply. *No point picking fights now. This talk means nothing.* She looked furtively around the chamber. *They'll wait a little past sunset, I'm sure. Make sure we're underway.* There were several Enforcers in the Council rooms with them, and plenty more in the hallways, double the usual guard.

One was positioned right behind Cassandra Kiramman. Her daughter. Caitlyn stood tall and stoic.

Cassandra gave a small, regretful sigh. "I do wish you had been wrong, Salo. But this violence can only spread."

"The technology used was simply remarkable!" Heimerdinger cried. He held one of the metal contraptions. "Miss Kiramman, you say you *levitated?*"

Caitlyn blinked, before the cool mask settled back into place. "Yes, Councillor."

"And the Enforcers know *nothing* about where the Undercity got this from?"

Mel watched her closely. *Don't, Caitlyn. Don't do it.*

Caitlyn glanced at Mel for a moment. They had barely spoken beyond pleasantries since Caitlyn lead her down into Zaun to meet Jayce…goodness, many months ago now. Caitlyn had no idea how involved she was now, but they held an uneasy, unspoken agreement not to mention the other's connection

with Jayce.

That was, of course, before he had turned gravity itself against all Caitlyn's colleagues.

Mel saw the conflict in her eyes, though there was only a brief pause before Caitlyn replied.

"No, no leads. But I can state clearly that we were completely unmatched and unprepared for the viciousness of the Undercity rebels." Anger flashed across her face.

"I find this failure of the Enforcers to reclaim my mines to be completely unacceptable!" Hoskel cried.

"Hoskel, please. This goes far beyond your mines," Cassandra said tightly. "A full revolution is imminent, is that not clear?"

"Then we must invade," Salo said. "There is no other choice."

Shoola looked disquieted. "An escalation such as this…when will this end? With all the Undercity thrown into Stillwater? Is this really the best course forwards?"

"Quite, Councillor," Mel said primly.

"Then what do you suggest?" Salo snapped. "If you can't stomach a full invasion to contain them, how do you propose we keep ourselves safe?"

Mel gave a long sigh, letting some genuine disappointment bleed through. "I don't know. But perhaps we need to listen to them, for once."

Salo just laughed, shaking his head. "This is how cities like ours die, Mel. If we let the Undercity rise up, they will *crush Piltover*."

"But what the gods are we going to do to fight this technology?" Hoskel said, slamming a fist on the table. "Or else we are walking into a slaughter."

"Well," Cassandra said carefully, rising to her feet. "I may have something to aid us with that."

Mel sat forwards, watching her intently. "Yes, Cassandra?" she asked, trying to sound only a little intrigued.

"I have—"

And at that moment, Mel saw something in the windows behind her.

A balloon rose into view, eclipsing the window. Loud, crashing music blasted from speakers. The balloon was scrawled in crazed symbols. She saw the girl with long, blue braids hefting a missile gun. It was aimed straight at Cassandra.

Mel threw herself to the ground a moment before the windows shattered.

Shards danced around her, as the other Councillors screamed and cowered. Caitlyn barked out orders as the four Enforcers in the room readied their weapons.

Mel heard the thud of feet landing heavily, then a loud, hissing sound. She sucked in a tentative breath.

The Grey raced down her throat and curled in her lungs like fire. Even prepared for it, Mel burst into a coughing fit, eyes streaming. Her body spasmed at the acid, trying to shove it out.

She managed to reach up, and grasping the table's edge, pull herself up far enough to peek over the edge.

Vi stood before the beautiful ruined window, bearing her gauntlets. There was black paint streaked down her face, half-hidden by a gas mask. She was flanked by the thin man with the ruined face, Silco. He wore no mask, and as Mel sucked down another lungful of acidic fire, she found herself sadly impressed. *These people have been through too much.*

On Vi's other side was Sevika. She had an absurdly oversized mechanical arm, with glowing veins and a thin, vicious knife for a hand. Those burning grey eyes peeked out from behind her hair, and muscles rippled, ready. The flashes of humour

Mel had glimpsed last night in the Lanes was gone. Only fury remained.

The girl with the braids, Jinx, appeared beside them. Then she vanished, somehow, with an echoing cackle.

How in the gods did she do that?

As the Enforcers bent over, spluttering, the girl zipped around the room, leaving a trail of pink. She plucked the masks from their belts, then locked the large Council doors before any more could storm in, sealing them shut with some kind of powdery explosive. Vi and Sevika moved quickly around the room and wrestled the guns from the Enforcers grasps.

Mel managed to stagger to her feet, leaning over the table. Her frame shook with wracking coughs. Silco met her gaze. There was nothing in his eyes but disdain, and he did not linger on her for a second.

Ah, a professional, she thought. *That really is refreshing*.

She could see the balloon out the window, with Ekko at the steering wheel. There was an odd shimmer between them, a light blue film of sorts. She spied a disc on the ground in front of the window, glowing Hextech blue. *Forcefield,* she realised. *Keeping in the gas.*

And doing a good job of it, she thought wryly, as another coughing fit overtook her, and she squeezed her burning eyes shut.

"Piltover," Silco said. His voice was as poisonous as the air hissing out of the canister in his hand. "*Esteemed* Councillors. We do hope you don't mind the intrusion. We thought it high time that we talked. And given you were never going to deign to sink to our level…we thought we'd bring ourselves up to yours."

Cassandra's voice shuddered. "The…Grey…..I helped…

you—"

"Do you know what I am thoroughly tired of, Councillor Kiramman?" Silco's voice was like a whip. "The *help* of arrogant, self-serving topsiders, as they offer solutions to problems that *they are creating.*" Jinx's wild cackle echoed again.

"The Undercity is no more," Vi called out. Her voice was filtered by the gas mask, deep and menacing. She stood over Caitlyn as she curled up on the floor. She stared down at the Enforcer, and did not touch her. "That name dies today. We are the people of Zaun."

"You *filthy*—" Salo hissed as he choked. Sevika rested her boot on his chest, the toe pressing into his throat. He cut off into a whimper.

"Don't want to finish your sentence?" she crooned.

"Weak little Pilties," Jinx crouched on the table, watching like a hawk for any sign of retaliation. "Not so brave when they can't hide behind their loyal little 'Forcers!"

Mel sucked in a breath. Her vision was clouding as she grew more desperate for air. Although, she found she was becoming accustomed to the feeling of the lining of her throat and lungs burning alive. It wasn't so different from some of Ambessa's exercises when she was younger, teaching her to withstand interrogation.

"What…do you want?" she rasped, making her voice as clear as she could.

Sevika looked at her. Mel was surprised to see something like warmth flash through her eyes. She stepped over Salo. Sevika grasped Mel's upper arm, and pushed her chest down onto the table. But the grip was firm, not bruising.

"Our demands are simple," Vi said. "Total sovereignty. We will govern ourselves. No Enforcer will set foot in the Lanes

again. Those in Stillwater will be freed. And Piltover will no longer control the movement of our people."

"No," Salo hissed immediately. Mel could see that Cassandra's struggles were beginning to weaken, the gas too much for her.

Silco gave a dark chuckle. "We'll allow you some time to deliberate. But do not mistake this for a request. It is a reminder. Every time you think of Zaun, remember this feeling of poison in your lungs. You made us live this, everyday. And now, *we are stronger than you*."

He dropped a thin cylinder on the table before them. "We are giving you one chance to surrender without bloodshed, rather than *taking* our independence from you. But believe me, either way…you will never set foot in Zaun again."

Vi and Jinx moved to his side. Sevika gave her arm a squeeze before releasing her, and rejoining them. Mel heard cries from the corridor outside as Enforcers attempted to break through the doors.

Mel's vision blurred further. She began to slump, losing strength in her arms. She heard an odd sound. Then pure, sweet, wonderful air swept into the room, and she gasped and heaved, trying to purge her lungs of the poison. Mel looked up to see the four Zaunites leaping onto the hovering balloon-craft. Sevika gave a mocking wave, and Mel almost smiled.

She slumped to the floor as the Enforcers finally broke into the room.

Mel curled up, focusing on sucking air into her abused lungs.

Well, that went rather well, she thought.

* * *

Mel drank the offered water down gratefully. Her voice cracked when she tried to thank the medic. The council rooms were filled with people, medics and Enforcers looking after the councillors, securing the area, speaking urgently to one another. Salo was ranting in the corner, and Shoola bent over the cylinder Silco had left behind. It contained a scroll of paper that she poured over carefully, no doubt detailing Zaun's conditions.

Mel sat quietly, assessing the impact of the gas on her body. This morning, after she had been debriefed on the plan with Silco and the others, Viktor pulled her aside before she left.

He offered her a small device. Two tiny disks with a fine mesh laid in his palm.

"To insert into your nose," he said softly. "It will filter out the worst of the gas."

She looked at them for a long time.

"Thank you," she said. "But I believe they won't be necessary."

He snorted lightly. "There's no need to be brave, Mel."

She shrugged a shoulder. "They could be discovered, which would raise a lot of difficult questions. If I survive the gas more easily than the others, it could be suspicious. There's no reason to jeopardise the plans out of comfort."

He gave her a long look. Something shone in his rich, gold eyes.

"You and I, we're not too different," he said. "We both seek solutions that avoid killing."

"Yes," she said firmly. "There is the fox, and the wolf."

"How so?"

"A clever fox can avoid brute force. But a fox without the bite of the wolf, is ineffective. The wolf, without the cleverness of the fox, is a simple, vicious beast." She sighed. The words were as familiar to her as breathing. She had spoken them to her mother in her mind

every single day, trying to find the perfect arrangement of words that might reach her, and make her see. Make Ambessa accept her.

It was foolish, of course.

She couldn't stop herself from practicing the words anyway.

"It is not a question of which is better. It is both, in balance."

Viktor smiled, and gave a slow nod. "Precisely. Precisely."

"I'm glad you agree. Zaun does seem to be able to balance both, in a way Piltover never has. It's part of why I'm here."

Viktor looked troubled. "Zaun can balance them, yes. I watch Jayce as he is...discovering the wolf. He is starting to understand the necessity of biting back against Piltover. And he needs to learn that. Zaun needs its wolves." He frowned. "But I believe in the fox, Mel. We have to be more than the violence."

"Yes," she said softly.

"And what I do admire," he said, glancing up at her. "Is a fox who knows that avoiding killing is not weakness. You are willing to walk into a room of poison for our people, in the name of pursuing the option that is not killing. That, Mel Medarda, is not weakness."

Mel blinked, and her cheeks grew warm. No one has really understood it before*, she thought.*

"Do you think you could repeat that to my mother?" she said weakly.

Viktor's eyes glowed as he smiled. "Gladly."

"No, if you're in the same room as my mother, become a wolf immediately*." He chuckled. "Thank you, Viktor," she murmured. "And for offering the filters."*

"We are grateful to you, Mel," he said. "All of us. Be careful."

Mel blinked as another medic came up to her. They offered to wash out her eyes again. She declined, though they ached terribly.

Cassandra sat in the council chair beside her. She had not coped well with the gas, and several medics hovered. Caitlyn stood over her, a protective hand resting on her weapon. Her red, watery eyes were sharp. Resolute.

Cassandra pulled herself shakily to her feet.

"Councillors," she called out. "I—" She broke off into a cough, and Caitlyn rushed to steady her. "I would wait for another time to share, but this cannot wait."

She gathered herself, then looked straight at Mel. There was something regretful in her eyes.

"Before this vicious attack, in fact, just before the battle in the mines yesterday…I sought help for our city. I have contacted Noxus. When Ambessa Medarda learned of our difficulties with the Undercity, she agreed at once to send aid. I received her reply this morning, confirming."

Mel felt breathless all over again. *Oh, no.*

"Aid?" asked Shoola.

"She and her best soldiers set sail a few days ago. We can expect them in two weeks." Cassandra weakened, sinking into her chair.

"Good," Salo snarled. "We'll overwhelm the sump-rats with numbers. The Noxians are relentless. We can march right into those cracks and clean them out for good."

Oh, gods.

"I apologise for keeping this from you, Mel," Cassandra said gently. "I was just aware of your…rather fraught relationship. I thought I'd wait, in case she declined."

Mel dropped her head in her hands. The other councillors couldn't see the fear on her face.

How dare she come here.

Gods.

Zaun, this might not be as easy as you think.

IV

Act IV

19

Vi

Vi ducked as the heavy wooden hammer swung towards her face with crushing speed. As it passed her, she pushed the head, dragging Jayce off-balance. He stumbled, right into Vi's fist to the stomach. Jayce gasped as the wind was knocked from him.

But as Vi swung for his face, he recovered, skirting backwards with surprising agility for such a large man. She nodded approvingly. That agility was hard-won. Jayce drilled every spare moment he could when not in the lab with Viktor, churning out shields, barricades, and weapons. The Firelight lab was full of banging, soldering, cursing, and mayhem at all hours, as their crew of Zaunites flowed in and out to help with the production. In fact, Vi heard another few labs had spung up nearby, run by some of their apprentices, pumping out Hextech to arm the Lanes. The Noxian ships were only a few days out, and every Zaunite she saw was run ragged. Vi was endlessly grateful that the street markets had become permanent, with

pots of stew bubbling at all hours, anyone welcome to take a bowl on their way through.

But all of them were getting an exhausted, watery-eyed look that had Vi worried.

Jayce swung for her again with the mock hammer. He'd crafted it carefully to replicate the Hex-hammer's weight and balance, but when it hit Vi, it just left her with bruises instead of fractures.

"Stop that," he said.

"What?" she scowled, darting back.

"Worrying."

"Hard not too when—" she grunted as she dashed forward and swung for his shoulder – "I've got no idea when you sleep these days."

"None of us are sleeping, least of all you. Viktor hasn't left the lab since Mel told us about the Noxians." He gasped as the punch landed. "But you can't exactly make us, Vi. Short of spiking the stew with a sleeping elixir."

"Interesting— agh!— idea."

"Maybe the real reason— I'm learning— to fight— is to knock *you* out properly to make you rest," he said with a grin.

"Get better, then," she shot back as their feet shuffled on the stone floor. They were in a warehouse near the Firelight home, an old one of Silco's that he'd given over for training. One crew in the corner practiced with some of the latest Hex-guns, and Jinx's old targets. Gert and her friends laid into punching bags beside them. The walls were covered with paint, plenty of Jinx's signature scrawls alongside Firelight symbols.

She stepped back after a few more minutes of sparring, panting and wiping the sweat from her face with her arm.

"You sure about this, Jayce?" she said. "You know, you could

do a lot of good just helping with Hextech from the back. You don't need to get into the thick of it if you don't want to."

"I know that." His heavy frown was beginning to look etched into his face. Vi shook her head as she remembered the baby-faced man who fell into the Lanes just— what, years ago now? Jayce was almost unrecognisable. He had on a tight shirt, his hair half-pulled back into a bun with several escaping tendrils. His beard glimmered with sweat, and several large runes were tattooed on his arms and torso. There was a heavy determination that lay on his shoulders, that Vi had only noticed after that day topside, with the Medarda and the Enforcers. She had ripped him a new one about provoking fights with Pilties that he couldn't win. She found she almost mourned that bright, naïve glint to his eyes.

But that was never going to last long down here.

She settled back into a fighting stance. "I'm not just being nice, dude. The Noxians land in a few days. If you fumble again—"

"I *know*," he growled, and swung at her. He wasn't holding back now.

"It's going to be worse than the mines," she gasped as she ducked.

"Vi," he said, the hammer missing her by inches. "Shut it."

She snorted. "Sound like someone I know."

"Who?"

"Me."

He huffed a laugh.

"Jawline!" came a cry. Vi took advantage of his split attention to land a punch on ear, just a tap. He shot her a glare.

She just cocked an eyebrow, stepping back. "Blue-bellies aren't gonna wait politely when you're distracted. Well, those

idiots might. But if what Mel says about Noxus is true, those soldiers definitely won't."

He just rolled his eyes, leaning against his hammer as a lanky teenager bounded up to him, one of the newer Firelight recruits.

"Jaayyce," she said plaintively. She wore a purple dress with bold golden stitching. It was too big for her, and she tugged at the shoulders. "Ekko says this isn't right. He said I look like a Piltie in drag!"

Ekko scoffed as he came up behind her. Jinx was with them, carrying a pile of gold-and-something clothes in her arms.

"Did not!" he said.

"He didn't. I did," Jinx grinned.

Jayce shook his head, pulling his hair out retying it to capture the loose strands from their fighting. "So, you're trying to look like a Piltie kid?"

"Aw, jawline, it took us months to get you to say 'Piltie'. Look at you go."

He swung a fist at Jinx slowly, and she zapped out of the way with a cackle.

"What are you dressing like them for?" Vi asked, spying a few other kids in the corner in poorly-fitting Piltover outfits. Ekko eyed her.

"Vi," Jinx said, crossing her arms. "We're just up to some mischief, okay?"

Vi frowned. "Yep. Fine. Sure." She tried to ignore the urge to cross-examine her sister and pick the plan apart. *I'm sure it's fine. She probably thought it through.*

Jinx? My sister? Thinking a plan through? Fear gnawed at her.

"Jaayce!" said the teen. "What's wrong with it?"

He looked her up and down. "Try changing your hair. It has to be neater. And those boots are definitely from the Lanes."

"But shoes are so much harder to steal than clothes!"

He shrugged. "You need something less scuffed in Piltover."

"Fine!" She flounced off. Jinx followed, throwing Vi a glare. Vi sighed to herself. Things had been going well with them. But spats like this kept cropping up as they all pushed themselves to the limit.

Ekko came up to her and placed a hand on her shoulder.

"Nice," he murmured. "I know that's not easy. The plan's good, I promise."

She almost rolled her eyes. *I'm meant to be the grown-up sister*, she thought ruefully. *And he's congratulating* me? *For not tackling Jinx to the ground to stop her from doing anything stupid?*

"What are you doing taking kids up there, Ekko?" she said sharply.

"They were gonna go up anyway and do something. We're just making sure they don't get caught doing it."

"Isha better not be—"

"No way. Jinx is gonna ask you to babysit."

"Good luck with that," Jayce muttered.

"And what exactly are you all getting up to?" she said.

"C'mon, Vi," Ekko sighed.

"Fine! Fine," she grumbled. "I just—" She punched her fist into her hand, feeling the adrenaline flowing through her. Oddly, it grounded her. She watched the crew practicing with Hex-guns across the warehouse, feeling a tug of nostalgia. Some were younger than Powder when she first starting jumping rooftops.

"Wish they got to grow up a bit more, Ekko. I don't want another batch of kids growing up like us."

"I know," Ekko said. He shrugged. "Maybe the next batch, hey?"

She gave a harsh grin. "Guess we gotta crush those Noxians

first."

Ekko grinned back, then glanced across at Jayce. "The fighting's looking good, jawline. You sure you're up for it this time?"

"I'm gonna need everyone to stop asking that," he said with a dark look.

"Let's show him what you really got," Vi said. Ekko stepped back, and Jayce hefted the hammer.

They fought, more serious now. Both were breathing heavily as they pushed their endurance, but they knew they'd need that stamina soon. Vi really let her punches land, and Jayce's hammer hissed dangerously through the air.

He gave a wide, ambitious swing for her midriff. She huffed as she danced out of the way, then shoved the hammer head to push him off-balance. *Come on, Jayce, you did that before—*

Jayce dropped the mock hammer. Unencumbered, he darted forwards. His punch landed beautifully on the point of Vi's chin. Her head snapped back, and a burst of white light filled her vision. She stumbled with a laugh.

"There it is," she said. Ekko nodded appreciatively. "Learning to fight with the big-ass hammer is good. But learning when *not* to fight with it is gonna save your life out there."

Jayce panted, hands on his knees. He met Vi's gaze. *Tapped out?*

She nodded.

"Feels strange to invent Hextech just to abandon it," he said.

"Oh, no, we're gonna use the shit out of Hextech," said Vi, taking water from Ekko gratefully. "But never rely on something flashy like that."

"*Flashy?*" said Jayce with a grin.

"We don't shit for granted down here, jawline," Ekko said.

"Anything good can be gone as quick as you got it. Gotta be ready for the worst."

Jayce gave a long sigh. "Gods. There's still so much I don't get about Zaun."

Vi slapped his shoulder. "You're a fast learner, buddy."

Ekko nodded. "And I tell you now, I don't want to be up against you in a fight, with or without that thing." He looked down at his feet. "And, actually…there's something I wanted to talk to you about." He flashed Vi a sheepish look.

"Yeah?"

"I think I want to help. A bit more."

"Help how?" Vi said, looking at him closely. The past few months had been good for Ekko. Though he looked as tired today as the rest of them, the permanent bags under his eyes had faded. His seedlings from the Firelight tree were flourishing under his gentle attention. He gave out plenty to different Zaunites every day, passing through the Firelight home or just on the streets. He often travelled to people's homes to help get them established, staying for hours to chat. He'd come back with all kinds of new ideas for Firelight projects to help people out. When he knelt and painted alongside the kids in the Firelight home, Vi could see that nerdy, gangly kid in Benzo's shop again.

"I do," he said, his determined eyes meeting hers. "Not fight-fighting. Lots of ducking, mostly. Still a bit nervous about… yknow…" He nodded at Jayce's hammer. "Being in the thick of things. I think I'd freak out if I had to block a hammer strike." Jayce snorted. "But I want to do…more. I've thought about it for a while."

"Are you sure?" Vi said softly. Her heart ached a little, proud and worried and-

"I have a suggestion," Jayce said gruffly. "We all stop asking each other that and just trust that we all know what we're doing."

Ekko laughed, and Vi grinned, loving that sound. She felt the fear pooling in her stomach and closed her eyes. She breathed deeply, trying to ignore it.

Ekko's hand landed on her shoulder. "We gonna trust each other?" Something shined in his eyes. *Hope.*

Vi sighed. "Yeah, buddy. You know I do."

He pulled her in for a hug, and she caught Jayce smiling softly. "I know," Ekko murmured.

20

Sevika

Sevika pressed her lips to warm, soft skin, drawing out a sigh. She trailed kisses down her chest, breathing in rich, heavenly perfume. *Why do topsiders always have to smell like something?*

Mel sighed and arched her body into Sevika's touch. "You can't possibly want to go again," she murmured. "I think my bones have melted."

Sevika drew her skin into her mouth, sucking lightly. She grinned as she extracted another sigh from the beautiful woman. Her large, rough hand smoothed over Mel's thigh.

"You just make the prettiest noises, princess," she breathed. Mel shivered. "I can't get enough of it."

"Maybe—" Her breath hitched as Sevika's mouth travelled lower. "Maybe I'm putting it on. Seducing you to steal the secrets of Hextech."

Mel's green eyes glittered in the half-light of Sevika's run-down bedroom. A glowing neon sign across the street filled the

room with lurid light. She didn't bother with a lamp. The sign gave her all the illumination she needed in here, anyway.

Sevika looked up at her, quirking an eyebrow. "Well, that's the upside of us being a pack of trusting idiots. We told you everything anyway."

"Mm, a clever story if you're hiding anything—"

"*And*," Sevika broke in. Her teeth closed around Mel's nipple, as her fingers dipped between her thighs to the wetness there. "I'm too good for girls to fake it."

Mel let out a broken moan, and rolled her body into hers. "That you know of— oh, *god*s, Sevika."

"Mmhmm, keep talking, sweetheart," she grinned.

Mel just whimpered.

* * *

A while later, Sevika lay back on the bed, reaching to her windowsill for a cigarette. *Not the same*, she thought. *Shimmer makes you feel fucking alive.* But she had done a good job of cutting down lately. And it was better than nothing.

Mel flicked the light off in the bathroom and appeared in the doorway. Sevika drank in the gentle curve of her hips, and the sight of her hair loose around her shoulders.

Gods, as beautiful as she is when it's all neatly coiled, and she's up there smooth-talking a room, poised and cunning…there's something special about her looking like this.

"We need to talk about my mother," Mel said, her voice cool as she crossed the room.

Sevika sighed. The lighter flame glowed as she light the

cigarette. "Is she hot?" she said with a smirk.

"That's not funny."

"Sorry," she muttered. Mel gave her a small, forgiving smile, before laying down on the bed beside her.

"Her fleet is only two days away, by the council's best estimates. And we need to prepare for her to deduce my true allegiance within minutes of walking into this city."

Sevika snorted. "Can't keep your act up?"

"No. She's just that good, unfortunately."

Sevika blew out a stream of smoke. "She sounds like a powerful woman."

Mel gave her an empty smile. "You know what? That's all she is, really. Powerful. But, warm? Loving? Motherly?" She just snorted.

Strange, she thought. *Usually, people don't hang around afterwards and tell me about their mothers. Especially not the topsiders.*

Sevika drew in a lungful of smoke. "You seem…afraid of her."

Mel didn't answer for a long moment. "I would be a fool not to be."

Sevika slid down the pillows a little. "You know, I don't think I've seen anything else scare you, princess."

Mel blinked at her. "I…" She trailed off. "Nothing else really compares…to her. It was easier with Kino around."

"Kino?"

"My brother," Mel said quietly. "At least there was someone else who understood what it was like, being a *child of Ambessa Medarda*. But he's gone, now." Her face was achingly sad. Sevika wondered how long it had been since Mel Medarda cried.

"He would've loved Zaun. Maybe. He believed deeply in the power of diplomacy over warfare. Zaun's attitude may be slightly too—"

"Pragmatic?" Sevika smirked.

"Just…bloody."

"We're not the ones bringing the blood."

"Yes, I know." Mel frowned, chewing over her thoughts. "People like my mother push violence into the world. But I'm learning something that I didn't think was possible."

"Mm?"

"You can push compassion into the world just as easily. And she will not believe that is possible, either." Mel gazed into the distance, lost in thought.

Sevika ran a hand down her back, light and slow, leaving her to her plotting. They lay that way for a while. Sevika's nose rested at the crown of her hair, and she breathed in the perfume. It had been a while since anyone had laid their body beside hers, to truly just rest. She realised she missed the heavy warmth of it.

Mel tilted her head up to look at her. Those stunning eyes pierced her, curious. "Why are you in this, Sevika? What happened to you to make you fight so hard for Zaun?"

Her hand halted. She rolled away onto her back, reaching for another cigarette. Something else to look at. *Been a goddamn while since I actually told someone this story.*

"My brother's dead, too."

"Oh. I'm sorry."

Sevika just grunted. "It's fine." A lie she'd told so many times it was almost true.

"How did he die?"

"Mining accident," she mumbled around the cigarette. "Like a thousand other sump-rats. Made me realise we were just gonna keep dying if nothing changed, and it wasn't gonna change if I kept my head down in the rocks." She snorted. "Old man didn't

agree."

"At least you proved him wrong," Mel said wryly.

"He'll be dead before he admits that." After the victory in the mines, they had barely spoken. But Bool had softened a little. He called her Sevika last time they spoke. She's tried not to let herself react to it, but her younger self hadn't quite got the message.

Mel's fingers traced over her torso lightly. "*Sump-rat.* I don't know how many times I heard Salo utter it in the council chambers…while Cassandra sat there, saying *denizens of Piltover* and looking self-righteous. But still, she did nothing, not really." Anger and guilt flashed over her face.

Sevika grunted. "I'll take being called sump-rat to my face any day to people like that."

"Such an ugly word," Mel sighed.

"Well, we're pretty ugly down here." Sevika cocked an eyebrow.

"My kind of ugly," Mel said. She gave her a coy, syrupy look.

Sevika tried not to roll her eyes. *Oh, come on. Not this act.*

"You don't have to do that, you know."

"Do what?"

"*Charm* me."

Mel drew back sharply, narrowing her eyes. "What do you mean?"

"Don't get me wrong, you're damn good at it," she said, sucking in a breath of smoke. Mel's eyebrows raised. "You know how to wrap people around your little finger. And, you're not even a bastard when you do it." She looked directly at her. "But I don't care. Don't bother charming me, and don't bullshit me. We're not falling in love. We'll just enjoy this while it lasts and have a good time, yeah?"

"You think me asking about your dead family is bullshitting?" Mel's voice was hard.

"No," Sevika sighed. *I can never say this shit right.* "No. I just mean, you don't have to be extra sweet or whatever if you don't want to be. You can be cold as you want. Shit knows I am."

Mel was quiet for a time. Sevika watched her, waiting to see if she'd storm out.

Finally, Mel cocked her head. "Hmm," she said.

"Hmm?"

"Just…pragmatism, once again. I like it."

"I guess it is."

Mel reached over and plucked Sevika's cigarette from her fingers. "Well, goodness knows I've done plenty of bullshitting with my bed partners in my time."

Sevika grinned as the dirty word left her beautiful lips. "I bet you were good at it, too."

"Oh, yes," she said languidly. "People love falling in love. But a bit of transparency sounds…rather appealing."

"There's a lot to like about pragmatic sex," Sevika said as she brushed her nose to Mel's ear.

"To be clear, it's not that I don't like you," Mel said softly, the tip glowing as she breathed in.

Sevika gave her a cocky grin. "You just came, what, five times? You love me."

Mel blew a thin stream of smoke into her face. Sevika grinned, and leaned in to kiss her. She drew Mel's full bottom lip gently into her mouth, and she melted against her.

"I will say, Sevika," Mel said as they parted. Sevika found is amusing how she enunciated her name, drawing out the vowels so it sounded almost regal. "You believe yourself to be cold? Because—" she pressed a deep kiss to her lips. "I do not."

"I said you don't have to bullshit—"

"You *said,*" Mel raised her eyebrows. "That I can be as cold as I like, which I do appreciate. I often have to cover up that side of myself to protect tender hearts. But I will also be as *warm* as I like, my dear, and you cannot stop me." She looked at her with every inch of terrifying, Medarda might. "You are a fierce, generous, and kind woman, Sevika, and I'm rather enjoying your company."

Sevika blinked. She probably would have been less shocked if Mel had tried to stab her.

Mel looked smug at leaving her speechless. She began to kiss her way down Sevika's muscular stomach.

"And you're not the only generous one," Mel breathed.

Damn, Sevika thought, as a gasp left her lips. *I'm going to have to sleep with her again, aren't I?*

21

Viktor

Jayce winced as Viktor prodded the wound on his chest.

"Hold still," Viktor said sharply. Jayce did so with characteristic obedience. He perched on a stool before Viktor. The lab was quiet around them for the first time in weeks. Just the two of them. Jayce had been in the lab less and less, and more and more bruised when Viktor did see him. Viktor could handle the Hextech side of things, he had more assistants than he knew what to do with. *But gods, I miss my partner.*

"Sorry," Jayce mumbled. "How bad is it?"

Viktor used a long, metal instrument to inspect the wound. "I do not believe you require stitches. Simply a thorough clean and a bandage." He looked at his partner pointedly. "A robust one, of course, to survive tomorrow's trials."

Jayce looked sheepish. "That…that sounds good. Thanks, V."

Viktor reached for the pile of clean rags they kept in the medical kit. He squirted a good amount of the strong-smelling

liquid onto one. Singed had been able to request the medicine from Ionia through the Hexgates, and it was working wonders on the many cuts and scrapes of Zaunites.

He took the wad of fabric and pressed it firmly to Jayce's skin, dragging it along the cut. "And *why* did you think that helping Sevika test out her new attachments – on the eve of the Noxian landing – was wise? You didn't think to turn in for an early night? Conserve your strength?"

Jayce hissed, and the muscles went taut under his hand. "Not much of an early night for you, either," he said pointedly, glancing at the half-finished Hex-cannon on the lab bench.

"I'm not intending to fight anyone tomorrow," Viktor said. The silence settled between them, ugly.

"Viktor," Jayce said quietly. "I'm sorry I was careless. I've been a bit carried away with Vi and fighting and everything. I just— I just want to be *ready*. This time." Fear wobbled in his eyes. "I can't freeze up again."

Viktor prepared a fresh rag and wiped it slowly over the cut again. Jayce only winced this time. "I know, Jayce. And it is a credit to you that you are so dedicated."

Jayce watched him closely, saying nothing. Viktor gripped the rag tightly as he cleaned the cut again.

After a pause, Jayce pressed. "I know you don't like the fighting, *querida*." His hand came up to Viktor's, holding gently.

"It is fine," Viktor bit out.

"It doesn't have to be fine," Jayce said. Those bronze eyes searched for his, worried.

Viktor looked away. *He knows me too well. Damn partners, can't hide anything from them.*

Viktor lay the cloth aside, and pressed a smelly hand to Jayce's cheek. He leaned in immediately, closing his eyes, as Viktor

stroked his fingertips through the beard.

"You misunderstand me," Viktor said, voice soft. "I am not angry at you. I'm simply angry at the necessity of this. I wish you could stay with me and make silly, beautiful inventions together in our lab all day."

"I do, too," Jayce broke in.

"I know," Viktor soothed. "I know you do, *lásko.* You're trying so hard. It's why I try not to…" He closed his eyes as something twisted in his chest.

"What, Viktor?"

"Burden you with this," he whispered.

"V," Jayce sighed. He reached forwards to embrace him, but winced around the cut on his chest. Instead, Jayce settled his forehead against his own. It seemed so long ago that Viktor had first taught him that this was the most meaningful gesture of love among Zaunites.

Viktor kept his eyes closed, unable to bring himself to look at his partner. Their breaths mingled.

"You can burden me with anything, *queridi*," Jayce said softly.

Fear spasmed in his chest, as he let the words tumble out. "I miss you, Jayce. And I'm— I am terrified for you."

"I'm going to be fine."

"No empty words," he said sharply.

Jayce's hand pressed against his cheek. "Then I will fight like hell for Zaun, Viktor. And I will come home, to our lab. We'll tinker with silly, beautiful things all day."

Viktor smiled. He tilted his head, and kissed him. *Gods, I'm lucky.* They pressed together for a long moment.

"Thank you," Viktor murmured.

"I'm sorry I let Sevika slice me up," Jayce said. "Your new attachment did great, though."

Viktor chuckled. "You are a passionate and impulsive man, and I love that about you. How could I blame you for doing passionate and impulsive things?"

Jayce grinned. "Could do it a bit, if you wanted."

"Not tonight," Viktor breathed, pressing another kiss to his lips, before leaning back. "Now, let me finish this."

Jayce sat silently for a few more minutes as Viktor cleaned the shallow cut, then prepared a bandage to wrap around it.

"I could just have a bit of Shimmer to heal it up," Jayce said idly, watching Viktor's hands work.

He stilled.

Viktor had not told Jayce about the Shimmer. It had been especially difficult to keep it hidden the last few weeks, he so rarely had moments alone in the frantic preparations around the Firelights. But he managed. Just once a day now, as he ran the shower. His veins glowed purple as that ache finally, finally eased.

Though, since living at the Firelight home the last few weeks, he felt the itch a little less. The company of others around his lab was soothing in a way that he normally found abrasive. Someone always ran down to the bubbling dinner pots to fetch him a bowl for dinner, so he didn't have to walk there. Some days, he even forgot to take the Shimmer, his pain faded into the background

But he still had not told Jayce. The guilt ate at him. He knew he should've before the fight in the mines, but he hadn't wanted to distract Jayce. He should've after the fight, but he hadn't wanted to ruin his joy.

"What?" said Jayce, noticing Viktor's reaction.

"Nothing," he muttered.

"I've still never had Shimmer," Jayce said, fiddling with one

of the instruments. "Probably should. If I get hurt in battle, I might need it, and it would be good to be prepared for how it affects—"

"No," Viktor snapped.

Jayce stared at him. "Viktor?"

"You'll be fine without it."

"You sound like Ekko," Jayce said. "I'll be careful. I won't get addicted. But Huck is doing way better these days, after you got him to come to the tree. I'm kind of curious, anyway. It might be good to fight with—"

"No, Jayce." Viktor's hands were trembling. "You'll be fine without it." He felt like his brain was shutting down. *Just need to distract him, talk about anything else, just stop* talking *about this—*

"Viktor?" he murmured, looking at him closely. "It's alright. I won't get addicted to Shimmer, okay?"

Something snapped inside him.

"I'm addicted to Shimmer."

Jayce went still. Viktor was frozen.

Oh no. Now he leaves, of course he leaves, what kind of partner am I anyway, how could I do this to him—

"You— you are?" Jayce's voice cracked.

"Yes, Jayce." The words came out cold and clipped.

"I—" Jayce looked like he'd been punched. "How long?"

Viktor began to tremble. *The questions, shit, the questions, then he's going to leave—*

"Hey, *queridi*, hey, come here." Jayce pulled him into an embrace. The weight of him, those arms crushing him in just the right way, that familiar scent…Viktor closed his eyes.

"Your cut," Viktor muttered into his shoulder.

"Just clean it again."

Viktor gave in, and clung to his partner. "The whole time," he

whispered. "That's how long—" *I've been lying to you.*

There was a pause. Viktor wasn't sure if he heard him.

"The whole time?" Jayce said slowly.

Shit, here it comes.

"Who else knows?"

"Jinx," Viktor muttered. "She gets it for me. No one— no one else."

"*No-one else* knows? That's so lonely, *querida*."

Viktor finally felt tears well in his eyes. "*Jayce,*" he moaned. Jayce's arms squeezed a little tighter.

"Does it help with the pain?"

Viktor gave a sigh that felt like it escaped from the depths of his soul. "It is the only thing that does."

"I thought orgasms helped," Jayce said plaintively.

Viktor snorted, then started to laugh, deep, full laughter like he hadn't in a long time. Jayce chuckled.

Viktor pulled back and cupped Jayce's face in his hands. "The wonderful orgasms you give me also help, *lásko,* I promise."

"They do?" And though Viktor could see the teasing smile on his lips, there was deep worry in his eyes.

"Yes. You do." Then Viktor felt himself crumbling again. *I'm actually telling him.* "I'm sorry, my love, I'm sorry, I'm *sorry—*"

Jayce cut him off by sweeping him into another crushing embrace. "Shh," he soothed, stroking his long curls.

"Viktor," he said finally, his voice careful. "You can tell me these things, you know? When you're angry, and when you're hurting like this. You don't— you don't have to tell me everything—"

"*Lásko*, you've deserved to know this for a very long time," Viktor said firmly. "I'm truly sorry."

Jayce stroked his hair again. Viktor still wasn't used to the

feeling. No one had ever touched him with the tenderness that Jayce did.

"I'm just grateful you're telling me now," he said softly.

Then Jayce pulled back, with a serious look on your face. "What can we do?" he said simply.

We. Viktor almost cried. "I'm not sure."

Jayce waited, hands resting on Viktor's waist. Giving him space.

"…Singed has been concocting a remedy to help people wean off it," Viktor said finally.

"So…you'd tell him?" His thumbs rubbed soothingly over his hips.

A full-body tremor went through him. *No*. He sighed. "Yes."

"And…there's Ekko, he's got that program." Jayce said gently.

Viktor gripped tight to his forearms, grounding himself. "Yes. I…think that would be…helpful. And…I might move in here. To the tree. Perhaps. Temporarily, of course. I have found it…beneficial, the past few weeks."

Jayce gave him a wide smile. Viktor basked in it, leaning into his partner. He felt strangely exhausted.

"I don't know if rotting in this lab is the healthiest thing, though, Viktor."

He snorted. "No, not into the lab, I'll put a bed somewhere else. Just a little more company right now would be good."

"I'm sorry I haven't been here as often." Jayce said, guilty.

"No, love, don't do that," Viktor said softly. "There are plenty of people who can help." Bitter fear struck him. "Although, we must see how tomorrow goes. If the Noxians even leave us a lab to live in."

Jayce stiffened. "Don't talk like that."

He just sighed. "I'm sorry to do this while we should be

preparing for—"

"Viktor, it had to happen some time. There is no right time."

"This is true," he said softly. "Jayce, I will be more honest with you in future. Even if it can be…" *terrifying*. "Difficult. For me."

Jayce cupped his cheek. "Thank you. I would like that."

Viktor rested their foreheads together once again. *I would do anything for this love,* he mused. They stayed that way for a long time.

Viktor finally pulled away. "I'll clean you up again, *zlato*," he sighed.

"Thank you," Jayce murmured. "You may need to tomorrow, as well."

"I won't, because you're going to be extraordinarily careful, yes?"

"Yes," he said, his eyes burning. "Anything you say, *querida."*

22

Vi

Bright, fluffy clouds blew over their heads. Vi always forgot how tall and blue the sky was up here. She sat on the edge of the roof, legs dangling over thin air, looking out over the gilded city. So many neat, cutting lines. So different from the curving architecture of Zaun. *Soon,* she thought. *Soon, we'll be free of them* .

Jinx crouched beside her, peering through a long telescope. "Ship's are getting close, sis. Maybe half an hour out. And there's the little council down there, ready and waiting." She snorted. "Blue-bellies coming out of their ass."

Vi nodded slowly. She could see the red sails herself, around a dozen, sailing steadily towards Piltover's docks. By Mel's estimate, they would carry a few hundred Noxian soldiers. They would fortify Piltover's hundreds of Enforcers. That left Zaun outnumbered maybe two to one, and their Zaunites were hardly battle-hardened fighters.

But they had plenty of tricks up their sleeve. She felt a churn of excitement and dread in her stomach. *It's just a big old pitfight.*

Vi squinted at barricades on the bridge. Zaun had piled scrap metal up as tall as buildings, with the help of Ekko's deweighters. The Enforcer barricade lay near the Piltover end, though it was far less robust. *After all, they want to get to us, not the other way around. Got no interest in their fancy streets. Just leave us goddamn alone.*

But Piltie pride would never have that.

"We're gonna be just fine," Jinx said, almost buzzing with excitement. "You wait and see."

Vi sighed, trying to absorb her sister's confidence. "Nah. No more waiting." She climbed to her feet.

Jinx bounced nervously on her feet for a moment. Then she threw her arms around her.

Vi froze. The last time she'd actually hugged her sister's slim frame had been…well, definitely before Stillwater. Before Vander, really.

After a moment, she wrapped her arms around her. Jinx swayed, clinging tight.

"Love you," Jinx grunted. Then she danced away. Vi stumbled and shook her head with a grin. For a moment, she was reminded of when a feral cat finally sniffs your hand.

"Bet I can beat you down there!" Jinx yelled over her shoulder, as she zapped away to tell the others.

"Love you too, sis," Vi called out. She ran after her and leapt into the air, landing on a pipe and scrambling down with a laugh.

* * *

The balloon swayed around her. Vi hung tight to a metal strut with a glowing Hex-fist. Ekko stood at the wheel at the centre of the deck, steering with a concentrated frown. The deck was crowded with Zaunite fighters, a nervous energy in the air. Vi peered out and tried to gauge their height. She could see the ocean, a few dozen meters below them. *The docks must be close.*

"They spotted us. About to fire!" Ekko called. He pulled a lever, and crashing music filled the air. The signal.

Jinx zapped to him and pressed a kiss to his cheek. Then she ran across the deck and leapt into thin air, falling for a moment with a cackle. Her boots flashed, and she zoomed. Firelights burst from the balloon around them, zipping through the air with flashes of green.

Just then, gunfire erupted from the Enforcers on the dock. Vi looked up anxiously at the balloon and its net of gemstones. It shimmered blue where the bullets bounced off.

"Forcefield is holding!" Jayce laughed beside her, holding his hammer tight. Vi grinned wildly back.

She watched Enforcers scramble on the docks below them, and one hefted a large weapon. Something came soaring towards them, far larger than a bullet. *There it goes, come on—*

Then Jinx was there. She popped up next to the missile, and slapped it. A large, blue disc sprung from her hand as she moved, forming a shield. She knocked it off-course, and the missile fell towards the ocean. It exploded harmlessly in the water.

The Firelights dashed through the air, dodging bullets and deflecting missiles. Vi could see the docks coming up fast below them. Enforcers cried out, pulling councillors and other Pilties out of the way as they descended.

A tall woman stood strong before the ship, arms crossed. She wore grey armour and a red cape. Vi could almost feel her stern

gaze. *That must be her. Ambessa Medarda.* She certainly looked the part.

"Hold on!" Ekko yelled, and Vi clung tight. The balloon landed heavily on the cobblestones.

Bullets hit the shield all over, clattering like rain. But Vi could see bodies dropping around them as the bullets ricocheted off. They hit unsuspecting topsiders, Noxian soldiers and Enforcers and Piltover's elite—

"Stop!" came a roar. Everything fell still.

Noxians and Enforcers were stunned instantly into obeying the command. Vi looked around, searching…and saw Mel. She was crouched among the topsiders beside a fallen councillor, the strange robot one. She met Vi's gaze, and gave a tiny nod. *Unhurt*. Good.

Vi stepped to the front of the decking, followed by Jayce, Gert, Sevika, and Silco. The older Kiramman woman stood beside the general, shaking. Her daughter stood close behind. Vi watched Caitlyn, wearing as much armour as possible, her gun held steady in her hands. Caitlyn watched her.

"I take it you represent the nation of Zaun," the Noxian general called.

Vi shot Sevika a look. She nodded at her, grey eyes steely. *Let's do this.*

Vi leapt off the deck, landing in a crouch. Thuds came beside her as the others landed. They approached together.

The general looked at her second in command, a large, hulking man. She gave a small nod.

Vi hardly blinked before a dagger was spinning towards her face. She lifted her chin and stared it down, unflinching.

The dagger deflected off their forcefield just a foot in front of her. There was a *zap* of blue light, spreading across the front

of the Zaunites. She squared her shoulders and smirked at the general.

"Good girl," she heard Silco mutter beside her. She shot him a glare, but he didn't look condescending. Only proud.

"Ambessa Medarda!" Vi called. "Welcome to Zaun. And Piltover."

A look of surprise flashed over the scarred face before she carefully schooled her expression. "You know my name, Zaunite. To whom am I addressing?"

"'Zaunite' will do," Silco said. Vi and the rest of them had light plates of metal strapped to them, glowing blue, and were armed with gauntlets, hammers, and other weapons. But he was dressed exactly as usual. His slim suit was edged in rich red and gold. He looked as relaxed as if they were having drinks at the Last Drop.

"You," Ambessa said, eyes narrowing. "Your eye. You must be Silco."

He tilted his head in recognition.

"You have been wreaking all kinds of havoc in the Noxian market," she said slyly. "I take it this…harnessed magic is to blame for your goods materialising out of thin air in my city?"

"I would apologise, General Medarda, but you are intent on invading *my* city."

Cassandra's face went red beside her. "How dare you— *your* city—" she hissed. But the general raised her hand, and she fell silent.

Gods, Mel was right, Vi thought. *She just silenced one of the most powerful people in Piltover, and she's been here...what, a few minutes?*

"From my understanding, you are under the control of the city of Piltover," the general said carefully. "I am here to help

maintain peace."

"And our flashy forcefields have nothing to do with it?" Jinx yelled, hovering above the ground. The general gave her a patronising glare.

"How unusual," Silco said. "Noxus does not generally have an affinity for peace."

"What is it they go on about again?" Vi said, cocking her head. "Vision, might, guile…conquering, greed, something, something?" Gert laughed.

Ambessa frowned, disquieted. "You know our Medarda principles surprisingly well, Zaunite."

Silco stroked a fingertip along his jaw. "Yes, we know quite a bit of your people, Ambessa. In fact, we know quite a bit about *you.* My apologies, I'm the closest to your taste in men that we could scrounge up. And I regret to inform you, you're not quite my type." Sevika snorted.

Ambessa's stance shifted. She darted a look around them—

"But we'll make sure to get you a cup of sweetmilk before your bed tonight," Vi said. "On your ship, heading back to Noxus. You take it with a dash of Ionian whiskey, isn't that right?"

Her face fell black as a thunderstorm as she turned. "You little—"

"Yes, Mother?" Mel's voice rang loud and clear as she walked forwards from the ring of watching topsiders. Her slim dress was black and richly decorated in gold, the shining image of Piltovian elite. She stood beside Silco. "Something to say to us?"

The councillors behind her gasped. The blond man's face was twisted in a horrible, self-satisfied smile. Cassandra looked like she'd been slapped.

Ambessa boiled with rage. "What have you done, Mel?"

"Won this war," she said confidently. "Which you may do, as well, Mother. Abandon Piltover. Zaun will share the secrets of Hextech with you."

Doubt flashed over the general's face. *She wants this tech badly. And she knows Zaun can win.*

Then she just shook her head. "Siding with rebels, Mel? I knew you were overly trusting, but this is just foolish." She squared her shoulders. "Sedition, left unchecked, is a cancer in an otherwise healthy nation. If their independence is granted today, tomorrow they will look at the rest of Piltover, and they will covet it. "

"You war pigs are all the same!" Vi said loudly. Jinx cackled above them. "Can't wrap your minds around the idea that not everyone is as power-hungry as you. We just want you to leave us alone!"

The general stared at her daughter, ignoring Vi. "Come. What sort of Medarda lowers herself to joining forces with rabble like this?"

Mel's eyes were bright and dangerous. "Mother, believe it or not, but I find the Medarda legacy of conquer and exploit to be shameful, not honourable. I am proud to help Zaun build something new."

Ambessa just sighed. "Still the idealist, I see."

Mel raised her chin. "I'd rather be dead than see the world through your cynical eyes."

The general looked away, and Vi thought she saw genuine hurt there.

"Noxus *will* be harnessing this…Hextech, one way or another. But it seems it will not be given up willingly."

She flung her cape away, and reached out a hand without looking. Her second in command placed a large, brutal-looking

weapon there.

"I give you this offer now, Zaun," she said in a booming voice. "Defeat me in battle, and this ends today. My soldiers will board our ships and depart. Piltover will fight alone." The Kiramman councillor twitched beside her.

Vi crouched a little, looking at the others. Mel had warned them of this. *She will want to fight honourably, at first,* she said. *But she is just curious about our weapons. You cannot win against Ambessa Medarda in single combat. And her honour only lasts as long as her pride.*

They met her gaze with nods. *But we're gonna damn try,* Vi thought.

"You, and us," she called out. "No one else."

The general nodded at her second. He barked out orders, and the Noxian soldiers fanned out, holding a wide ring around them. They looked squarely into the eyes of the Enforcers and their guns, the warning clear. Vi saw Caitlyn sheath hers.

She sucked in a breath, and stepped beyond the forcefield, as did Jayce, Sevika, and Gert. Silco retreated to the balloon, and Mel followed. They knew this was not their fight.

Ambessa placed a thick golden metal mask over her face, plenty of scars in the metal. *Plenty of fights won,* Vi thought warily. Ambessa sank into a crouch with a smile like a viper, ready to strike.

Vi clenched her fists. Her gauntlets hissed blue.

She rushed forwards, flanked by Gert in her own Hex-gauntlets, and Jayce with his hammer. She swung for Ambessa.

The general stepped smoothly out of reach, watching her gloves. Gert closed in, weaving around the swing of Jayce's hammer, as practised. Ambessa dodged them easily.

She's more interested in playing with the tech than trying to win.

Anger burned in her, and she struck out. But Ambessa moved like smoke, and Vi's gauntlets whistled through thin air. She evaded Jayce's next hammer swing with a grin.

"Ah, I like this one!" Ambessa said loudly. "*That* is a real weapon."

Then her chain whipped out towards Vi. She caught it with a yell as the metal curled around her glove, crushing it. The blue light blinked out. She removed her hand quickly, before the glove became dead weight.

Ambessa's arm flexed as she pulled the gauntlet to her, her muscles rippling. *Goddamn*, Vi couldn't help thinking.

She knelt to inspect the Hextech. "Ingenious," Ambessa declared. She whipped around as Jinx dropped from the sky towards her. She threw a dagger with deadly precision, forcing Jinx to zap away with a scream of frustration.

Sevika closed in. She gripped the general by the throat with glowing metal fingers. Sevika lifted her into the air with a wide, mad smile, veins of Shimmer-purple running over her whole body. Her muscles bulged inhumanly.

Ambessa hung there for a moment. She did not flail. Her scarred hands pulled at the fingers, but they didn't budge.

"You're gonna stay the fuck out of Zaun," Sevika snarled, more beast than human. She spun, and slammed the general into the ground.

But as Ambessa flew through the air, she somehow got herself twisted around. She shoved at Sevika's elbow, breaking the force before she connected with the cobblestones. There was a crack and a billow of dust.

The crack, it turned out, was Sevika's arm. As she staggered to her feet, half of it stayed on the ground. Sevika glared at the stump of her elbow, streaming green chem-fluid and Shimmer,

then at Ambessa.

The general tried to climb to her feet, but Sevika punched her square across the face with her human hand. Compared to all the tech around them, it may as well have been a slap.

Jayce hefted the hammer into position, and Vi rushed to help him with her one gauntlet.

"Veek!" she cried. Sevika staggered back towards the balloon, out of the way.

Ambessa advanced slowly. Jinx zapped around her, but she hurled her chains through the air, keeping the girl at bay.

"Come on, Jayce," Vi gasped. He cocked the handle with a yell as Ambessa stalked closer.

The first beam of light went wide, hitting Ambessa's second. He flew into the air then hung, suspended over the water, flailing.

Jayce groaned. "Come on," said Vi desperately. She could see Ambessa's eyes behind the mask now, deadly.

The next beam hit her square in the chest. She flew into the air—

Then the blue glow left her. She only rose a couple of feet before dropping to the ground quickly. Vi thought she saw a crackle of green light, but she blinked and it was gone. Ambessa landed on all fours like a cat.

"What?" Vi growled.

"I don't know," Jayce said wildly, twisting the hammer's handle.

The general sprang to her feet. She bared her teeth, and held up a fist.

The Noxian soldiers leapt into action, turning as one towards the Zaunites. Vi gave a wordless cry as their *honourable* duel dissolved.

But the Zaunites in the balloon were already flooding forwards. Shimmer-suits leapt into the air and landed heavily between them and the Noxian forces. Two faced Ambessa, beating back her chains.

Vi turned to the Enforcers that rushed towards them. She was one gauntlet down, but a sense of calm flooded through her.

Fuck, it feels good to hit back.

She fought, smashing her fist into one golden mask, then a red Noxian chest. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Jayce swing the hammer. It connected with a sickening crunch to the side of an Enforcer's head. Blood sprayed out as the body hit the ground. He stood still for a moment, breathing heavily. His eyes were wide.

Then, a spear raced towards him. He swiped it away with the hammer's handle, and swung. Several bodies flew backwards into the crowd of soldiers. He swung again, graceful now, his stepping sure. Vi nodded to herself. *There you go, jawline.*

An Enforcer stalked towards her, gun out. She knew her gauntlet would be too slow. As she tried to duck—

They exploded into blue smoke.

Jinx landed in front of her. "Go, sis," she hissed. Her eyes flashed a savage pink as she zapped away.

"Fall back!" Vi yelled. The Zaunites clumped together. They were surrounded on all sides by soldiers and screaming Pilties. Together, they began beating a retreat towards the balloon.

"Jayce!" she cried out. He barely seemed to hear, swinging his hammer with deadly precision. She punched his back, and he jerked, falling into line.

They ran for the balloon. Ekko was yelling something, his hands flashing over the controls.

Vi leapt onto the platform. *Gert, good, shit, her arm— Sevika— Jayce, come on.* Bool leapt on, holding back a group of Noxians. Jayce was last, brandishing the hammer at anyone who dared strike forwards.

Ambessa prowled to the front, pulling her arm back to—

"*Jayce*," she yelled. "Get the fuck up here!"

He leapt back, and the vicious steel missed him by inches.

As he jumped onto the platform, Vi scanned over the crowd. *No more Zaunites,* she thought gratefully.

"Ekko! " she cried, as guns began to fire again.

Vi met his wide eyes. But he didn't hesitate as he slammed his fist onto a button at the centre of the balloon's control panel. The gemstone net above them flared bright. She whipped back around to see Ambessa standing tall, bloodied but unhurt.

Then everything around her dissolved into blue-white light.

23

Jayce

Jayce could *feel* himself come apart, then be put back together again. He gasped and clung to the shaft of his hammer. His fists ceased to exist, as did the hammer itself.

Then everything reappeared.

He sucked in a breath into lungs that suddenly *were*, again.

They were on the bridge, behind their barricades. The haphazard metal loomed in front of him, defended by a crowd of dozens – *maybe hundreds?* – of Zaunites.

Vi staggered beside him. "Fuck, that was too close."

"We did it, though. The Hexgate fucking *worked,"* he said with a wild laugh. They had managed to shift the giant balloon through the Gates just a week ago. Viktor had stepped up to be the first human transfer a week before that, with a shrug of his shoulders and a troubling glint of scientific curiosity in his eye. It had gone smoothly, but they hadn't tested the full shift. Just in case.

Ekko ran to Jayce. His arms wrapped around him as he laughed. Jinx leapt down from a strut, and clung to them both, giggling.

"Always knew it would," said Vi. Her face was far too relieved for Jayce to believe her.

Jayce broke away. He looked down at the hammer, and the blood that now coated it. He just felt hollow. *Well, there we go. Said I could do it.* He shoved that thought out of his mind. *No time to process that right now.*

"What the fuck happened?" Vi said, frowning at the Hex-hammer. "Ambessa should've gotten dropped on her head."

"Dunno," Jayce said, crouching to check the alignment of the runes. "Just a glitch?"

Vi shook her head. "I don't like it."

"Do we…call it off?"

Her grey eyes glittered. "Are you kidding me? That was just the beginning."

"Come on!" Jinx yelled. "They're not going to let that shit slide."

* * *

Sure enough, it took only a few minutes for the Piltover side of the bridge to begin to stir. Not every Enforcer had been deployed to the docks for the arrival of Noxus. *They were ready for us to strike, just in case. Like Mel said.* Ekko had pulled Mel up onto his board and whisked her off to the safety of the Firelight tree. There'd been an uncharacteristic look of terror on her face as she rose into the air that made Jayce smile.

Now, he stood at the front of the Zaunite forces, with Gert and Vi at his side. Gert's arm was bloody, but wrapped up tight, and she absolutely refused Vi's insistence that she stay out of the battle.

He jumped at the *boom* of a Piltover cannon. Each impact shook the stones beneath his feet. Scar landed beside them.

"Update?" said Vi tightly.

"They're coming down the ladders and other entrances," Scar said. "Tried the elevators, but they're jammed up good."

"Good," she said. "How're we holding?"

"Just fine," he said with a grin. "Jinx's grenades are magic."

"Funny," Jayce muttered. The comment didn't even register. Vi just nodded at Scar, who zoomed off, speeding towards a missile that arched over the barricade and batting it away.

"Let's give this a crack, little man," Vi said, and Ekko dashed back to the balloon. He hovered at the console, until Vi waved her fist in the air. He fiddled with something.

At the barricade, a few of the largest pieces of metal began to shudder and glow. They were several storeys tall, mostly old building walls and machinery parts. With a deep groan, they rose slowly into the air, and drifted high above them, over the barricade. Piltover missiles and bullets hit them one after the other. They shimmered blue with each impact, deflecting even the strongest blasts.

Jayce felt a fierce rush of pride.

* * *

Jayce swung around himself, laying into the wall of blue. Several

Enforcers crumpled under the hammer's strike.

How did that feel so normal so quickly?

Jayce had no idea how much time had passed since he'd crossed the barricade, and the battle began in earnest. An hour? Two?

Vi's gauntlet followed his blows, holding back the soldiers easily. Jinx danced above them. She drew the Enforcer's fire and Noxian spears, evading them with a deranged laugh. She lobbed grenades into the topsiders with a series of *booms* .

Jayce glanced to his other side. A short, skinny Zaunite struck out at a Noxian soldier. She held a thin Hextech blade. The moment it touched their flesh, the soldier was flung backwards as if punched. They landed among their allies, knocking several over.

That's the kid from the other day, trying to be a Piltie. Jayce's stomach dropped. *A kid.* He stood in front of her protectively, growling at an oncoming Noxian. The girl shot him a look of annoyance. He ignored it as he defended their pocket.

At least she's not being gunned down in the Lanes, defenceless.

The Zaunites were holding ground well, their line at the centre of the bridge. But more and more soldiers were flooding in as Noxians made their way through the city from the docks. Jayce was beginning to feel his strikes slowing, even as the hammer stayed light in his hands.

He saw the topsider forces stir at their centre. A ring of Noxians pushed their way towards the front line.

Ambessa strode tall and proud at the centre.

Vi paused, and gave a shrill cry that cut through the sounds of battle.

Jinx zapped overhead, hovering for a moment. Vi raised a fist. She raised one back, and fiddled with a gadget.

Beyond the centre of the bridge, some cobblestones began to glow Hextech-blue. Every few meters, another burst alight. The Zaunite girl laughed and clapped. "I did those ones the other day!" she said gleefully to Jayce, pointing. "'Forcers didn't even see me!"

The gemstone network spread back further and further, right into the city lanes, lighting the topsider forces from below.

But Jayce realised that Ambessa didn't look worried as her fierce gaze met Vi's.

In fact, she was smiling.

Jinx gave the same chattering cry as Vi's. Zaunites echoed it back around him, raising their fists.

The blue cobblestones flashed as one, and the topsiders began to float. They drifted helplessly in the air. Even though they seemed somewhat prepared for the trick by now, having seen it or heard of it from the mines, there was simply nothing they could do to re-establish gravity. Jayce nudged an Enforcer backwards with the end of his hammer, and they bounced into a Noxian.

Jayce watched Ambessa carefully. And his stomach dropped as he saw that she was…delighted.

She reached for her hip, and pulled out a small brass horn of some kind. She brought it to her lips, and a bellow echoed across the battlefield.

All the Noxians reached for their hips. Jayce frowned as they pulled out small, strange pieces of metal. They glowed green. Jayce squinted, and realised they were-

Runes.

Oh, no.

Ambessa struck the metal against her steel breastplate. A bubble of green light flashed around her for a moment. The

Noxian soldiers followed, and the metal sparked green against the armour. *Wait, like Ambessa did in the duel—*

They had only floated a foot or two into the air, and as the runes flashed, they dropped to the ground once again. Any gemstones within arm's reach of them fell dull, and any nearby floating soldiers fell gratefully to the ground.

What in the gods is that? Did they just cancel out *magic?*

Ambessa dropped into a crouch. Although Jayce had faced down countless soldiers today, he felt his limbs gripped by deep fear.

The general blew through the horn once more, and the Noxians surged ahead.

Wait, no Hextech means—

Jayce could barely blink before a red soldier was lunging for him. They clapped the metal to the tip of the hammer, giving off a spark of green light. Their eyes were almost hungry.

The hammer's blue light blinked out. The weight of several tonnes of metal dropped into his hands. Jayce cried out as it clanged to the ground.

Jayce squared up to the Noxian soldier. He had no time to think.

No Hextech? Fine.

He lunged forward. The Noxian looked shocked for a moment, clearly not expecting such a quick recovery. Jayce's fist landed on his neck, and the spiked metal strapped to his knuckles dug deep between the seams of his armour. *Nailed it*, he thought. *I owe Gert a drink.*

The Noxian fell to the ground. Jayce grasped at the hammer's handle, and with a cry, lifted it just a foot, arms trembling.

He dropped it onto the Noxian's body.

Jayce staggered away, panting. He scooped up an abandoned

Hextech sword. It was now just a long piece of metal. He turned to face the oncoming soldiers. A deep wave of fatigue swept through him. *No hammer. No Hextech. Shit, how are we—*

"Vi," he gasped, turning. "Vi, we can't—"

She gripped his shoulder. Her last gauntlet lay beside her, useless and dull. Her hand was like a vice. "Jayce. No giving up. That's what they want."

Her eyes were steely, staring out from a face splattered with blood. For a moment, he stood in the Lanes again, watching a boy get shot. She'd had to slap him to get him to focus.

Come on, buddy. He nodded grimly .

"They're going to bring down the barricades," he said.

"Fuck," she muttered. She turned, and gave her shrill cry again. A Firelight flew overhead. She raised her arms in a cross, bare fists clenched, then pointed at the hovering sheets of metal.

They raised their fist, and dashed away.

Jayce swept in to block an Enforcer as they struck towards Vi. The short metal sword cracked over their eye, and blood sprayed out as they dropped.

Vi stood tall, looking over the Zaunite forces. They wavered as the Noxian soldiers advanced, deactivating Hextech weapons one by one. Many were forced to drop weapons far too heavy for them to carry.

"No Hextech! We *FIGHT!* " she cried.

And Zaun pulled out knives, short swords, knuckledusters. Some kicked at the Hextech weapons and broke off hunks of metal, swinging them with a grin. Green chem-tech burst alight, and Shimmer glowed.

The Noxians expected the Zaunites to falter as the Hextech fell useless. Instead, they fought harder. Jayce saw Ambessa's grin fade. Zaun began to push the topsiders, step by bloody

step, back towards Piltover. He felt a surge of hope.

Several green stones flew over their heads, aiming for the barricade. One connected with a giant sheet of metal, big as a building. He groaned as the blue glow winked out. It teetered for a moment, before plummeting to the bridge below. It landed with a deep, bone-rattling *boom.*

He turned to Vi. "The bridge is gonna—"

She was already running, fighting off topsiders as she dragged him and anyone else into a tighter clump.

Firelights began to descend from the sky. They scooped up two, three people at a time from the bridge and whisked them away. The topsiders pressed hard as their numbers dwindled. There was another *boom* from behind Jayce. *Another piece of barricade.* The bridge groaned ominously beneath him. Shimmer-suits were scooping up Zaunites, carrying them towards the barricade and leaping over easily.

Jinx landed heavily on the bridge beside them. Her boots still glowed blue as she dodged a Noxian and their glowing green stones.

"Vi," she growled. "Come on."

"There's no fucking way I'm leaving—!"

"Shut the fuck up and *listen to me* ." It was the first time Jayce had seen Jinx look afraid. But she ran to her sister and tackled her.

"Jayce—" Vi gasped.

"Go!" he just yelled.

"N—!"

"If you struggle, I'm dropping you in the river." Jinx's thin arms wrapped around Vi, and they rose into the air together. Jinx carried them towards the barricade, Vi's face like thunder. A green stone arced towards her, missing by inches. *If that had*

hit them, and Jinx's shoes...

Jayce turned back to the battle.

Someone will come for me.

Shit.

If this bridge crumbles and I'm on the wrong side...

Jayce fought as the Zaunite numbers shrank. They were rescued in clumps, Firelights zipping frantically. Some Noxians and Enforcers turned and fled as the bridge shook, but others pressed harder, gleeful at the signs of retreat.

A Firelight landed before him, but he shoved the girl towards them. She glared as she was yanked onto the board. The Firelight reached out a hand. Jayce just shook his head. *Not until they get everyone else.*

But when he turned back to the battle, he immediately regretted his noble choice.

Ambessa was bearing down on him like a bull, flanked by Noxian soliders. Her eyes burned with bloodlust beneath her mask, staring right at him.

Jayce gripped the short sword. It suddenly felt like nothing more than a screwdriver. *We barely held her back with four of us, and Hextech.*

He looked around him frantically. There, zooming past the barricades. Ekko sped towards him.

Too far away.

Ambessa didn't miss a step as another *boom* shook the bridge. She swept across the battlefield like a storm.

Gods, there's no way I can-

A figure moved in front of Jayce, dressed in blue and gold uniform.

She faced away from him. Towards Ambessa. She lifted her slim rifle, and pointed it at the general.

Ambessa stopped in her tracks. Her arms rippled as she clenched the chains tight, furious.

"What are you doing, Kiramman?" she growled.

Caitlyn stood tall and confident. Her finger moved. The bullet nicked the edge of Ambessa's mask, blowing just past her temple. Ambessa jerked, suddenly wary.

Jayce couldn't breathe.

"Cait?" he croaked. She flinched, but her aim did not. Still pointed right at Ambessa.

"Get out of here, Jayce." Her voice was tight, muffled by the Enforcer mask.

Boom. This time, as the barricade hit the bridge behind him, Jayce felt the stones really shift under his feet. *That's the one* .

Zaunites screamed as the bridge began to crumble into the river. Firelights descended on them in a swarm, rescuing the last few. The topsiders scrambled back. Their line disintegrated as they ran for the city. Ambessa gave him one last, savage glare before she blew her horn. *Retreat.*

Jayce stumbled as he felt the stones give way.

Caitlyn turned to him, and gave him a brusque nod. Then she ran with the last topsiders, for Piltover.

He felt Ekko's hand close on his wrist just as the bridge fell away beneath him.

24

Ekko

Jinx's head was heavy in his lap as she curled up in the booth. The Last Drop was strangely sombre for how crowded it was. After the battle of the mines, Zaun had been so alive and joyful in their victory.

But yesterday's was bittersweet.

Ekko tapped his pen rapidly against the blank sketchbook in front of him. He'd meant to start sketching out some of the Zaunites who fell in the battle, but his mind drifted. Scar reported that there were a few dozen of them who were never coming home.

He jumped as someone across the bar slammed their glass onto the table. Ekko shook his head, trying to clear the booms of the barricade from his mind. Jinx's hand squeezed his knee gently.

"Hey, little man," said Vi beside him. "You alright?"

"Feel like I should be asking you that," he mumbled. "You

actually fought out there."

"I'd be dead without you, Ekko." Jayce said softly. He barely looked up from his drink. A cut sliced across his eyebrow, crusted with blood. Viktor shot Ekko a look of deep gratitude as his fingers tightened on Jayce's.

Then he reached for the green, glowing piece of Noxian metal on the table. Viktor turned it over, reading the runes carefully. "Intriguing," he murmured. He plucked a gemstone from his brace, then slowly brought it in contact with the metal.

Green light crackled, drawing the attention of the Zaunites around them. The Last Drop fell quiet as they watched the Hextech gem fade. Their eyes were heavy and hopeless.

"How does it *do* that?" Ekko demanded.

Viktor's lips pressed tight. "I have no idea."

Vi slammed her glass to the table, and staggered to her feet. "So what! So we don't have the magic thing. Big deal!"

"So *everything*, kid," growled Bool. He sat hunched at the next table over with a crew of miners. Forma was conspicuously absent. Ekko's heart twisted. "Won't lie, it's fucking impressive how far you got. But that magic was our edge. Without it, they're gonna crush us."

Vi downed her drink and thrust her hand out. Gert passed a bottle to her, wincing as she shifted her bandaged arm. Vi tugged out the cork with her teeth and took a heavy gulp. Sevika chuckled to herself.

Vi wiped her hand with her leather sleeve. "They managed to take Hextech away from us, and we *still* shoved them back into Piltover. Have a bit of self-respect, Bool."

He rolled his eyes, opening his mouth to—

"It's not a matter of respect, Vi," Silco said softly. He had lost his usual air of acerbic control. His gaze kept drifting around

the Last Drop wistfully, and he looked as tired as the other Zaunites. "It's one of reality."

"That Noxian general…" Ekko said. He shook his head as fear curled in his stomach. "She'll never let us live."

Vi slammed the bottle to the table. "Fuck all this. I got an idea."

Silco raised a slim eyebrow.

"Prison break."

Jayce's eyes finally flicked up from his glass, curious.

"*Prison* break?" Ekko said incredulously.

"Yeah! Why not!" Vi said. She leant over the table. Though Ekko could smell the drink on her, her eyes were steady as steel.

"Wh— Vi, we barely held out against them *with* Hextech."

"We kicked their asses! I saw it myself, at least twice as many of them are dead as us." She stood taller, and every eye in the room was glued to her. "Let's go to Stillwater. Tomorrow."

"*Tomorrow?"* Ekko hissed. *She can't be serious.* "What about recovering?"

"They won't expect it," she said boldly. "Besides, if topside really are about to smash the Lanes, we're gonna need more fighters. And at least—" she cut off, clutching the bottle tight. She looked down. "At least they'll die free, with their people." A few Zaunites muttered at that, rubbing at tattoos or scars from their time in the cells.

Jayce ran his hand through his thick locks. "Well, Piltover might hand them over? We did hold up pretty well today. If we spooked them, they might agree to our terms, they might—"

Silco snorted. "Your gold is showing, *boy*." Jayce flushed. "Those prisoners were never going to be released alive."

"Look," Vi cut in. "I bet the Noxians haven't even had a chance to give these metal thingys to the Enforcers, or train them on

how to stop Hextech. Not yet." She glared at Bool, then Silco. "So, we attack while we still have the advantage. Who's in?"

Sevika sighed, looking at the table. "I'm out."

"What?" Vi looked like she'd been slapped.

"No, not— I think it's smart as shit, actually. I'm just…busy." She drank from her glass.

"Busy?"

"You're gonna have to trust me." Her slate eyes levelled at Vi.

Vi opened her mouth to argue, then snapped it shut "Stupid fucking freedom-to-do-what-we-want bullshit," she muttered. Sevika snorted.

A few other Zaunites in the room stood, nodding to themselves as they made their way over to Vi. Renni was deep in conversation with some chem-barons and their lackeys. Ekko could see that the despair had faded from their faces a little, replaced by anticipation.

Jinx's head shifted on Ekko's lap.

"Vi, I'm tired," Her voice was quiet from under the table.

Vi deflated. "You don't have to come, sis."

A shudder wracked her frame. Ekko squeezed her hand. "I don't?"

"No, Jinx," Vi said gently. "You don't have to do anything, okay?"

She rolled onto her back. Her pink eyes examined him with the kind of laser-focus she usually reserved for her gadgets.

"You fought yesterday," she murmured.

Guilt twisted in him. "I— I guess."

"But you were afraid."

He sighed. "I am afraid, Jinx. All the time."

"You didn't want to. You told us you wouldn't get into the thick of it." Her voice wasn't cold, or judgemental. Just curious.

"Yeah."

"Why did you, then?"

He frowned to himself. "I…thought I could handle it. I just couldn't watch anymore. Jayce was going to fall."

"And *can* you handle it?"

Ekko squeezed her hand tighter. He'd been feeling a lingering jitteriness all day. But, he looked at her, admiring the blush of her tattoos on her skin. And found that it eased a little.

"I think…I'm stronger than I realised. But it took trying not to fight to realise that."

"How do I know when to hide and when to fight?"

Ekko gave her a sad smile. "I'll tell you when I figure it out."

Jinx's gaze unfocused a little, deep in thought. Finally, she pulled herself up to sit at the booth.

Jinx gave her sister a tiny nod.

"Thanks, sis." Vi said, voice thick and grateful. Jinx sipped her juice, pulling her knees up to her chin, not looking at anyone. He dropped a tiny kiss to her shoulder.

"What about you, little man?" Vi said.

Ekko frowned. *A prison?* Nowhere to fly away to? His stomach clenched, and he—

"Actually, I could use the kid," Sevika said from down the table.

"What for?" Vi crossed her arms. "Does this plan have something to do with your *girlfriend*?"

Sevika rolled her eyes. "Vi, don't you have a prison break to plan? Leave it to me."

"Vi? Plan something?" Ekko grumbled. She shot him a glare. He met Sevika's gaze, and nodded quickly. She tilted her glass to him.

Just then, the doors of the Last Drop swung open. Ekko

glanced up as Lest slipped inside, shedding a nondescript grey cloak.

"How's topside?" Ekko asked as she slid into the booth beside them.

She let out a shaky breath. "Tense. I don't think they'll let me hang around much longer. It's too well-known that I'm from the Undercity."

"Are they fucking pleased with themselves," Vi asked bitterly, swigging from the bottle.

Lest snorted. "They're fighting like toddlers. That Ambessa woman is trying to pull all the councillors in line. Cassandra's being spineless, but Salo's not having a bar of it. Bolbok's dead, and the Yordle has vanished." She scratched around the base of her ear, weary. She eyed Vi's bottle. "Can I have some of that?"

Vi poured her a heavy glass.

"So, what's the plan?" Lest asked.

"Stillwater," Vi grunted. "Tomorrow."

Lest paused, glass halfway to her lips. "Hmm." She sipped slowly. "I like it."

"You do?" said Ekko.

"I wonder if you see the Kiramman girl."

Jayce's head snapped up. "What?"

Lest's sharp eyes met his. "Caitlyn Kiramman. Her own mother put her in Stillwater, at the general's command. Something about *treason.* How that works when it was a *foreign* monarch that she apparently threatened, I have no idea. But that's Piltie justice for you."

Vi looked shocked. Jayce's eyes burned as he looked at Vi.

"I'm in."

25

Sevika

Sevika looked out over the dark water, shimmering with the lights of Noxian ships and Piltover's streetlamps. The familiar stink of river toxins filled her nose, along with cigarette smoke. It had been a while since she'd been to this spot. Silco had brought her here just a handful of times, giving his speeches about *being strong,* hating Vander while so clearly loving him. She'd half-expected to find him lingering here tonight, actually, after the tense arguments at the Last Drop. She never thought she'd see that hopeless look in his eye that she saw tonight.

This plan had better work.

She'd walked up to Ekko at the Last Drop after he agreed, clamping her metal hand down on his shoulder. "Let's go, then," she said.

Ekko started in the booth. "Now?"

"Can't wait."

"I— okay."

Jinx watched them with a frown as Ekko collected his board and followed her out.

Now, she sat alone. Waiting. The familiar anticipation of a job curled in her stomach as she sucked in another breath of smoke. But she hadn't quite done a job like this before.

Sevika spotted a shadow on the water, moving wrong. Ekko drifted towards her over the river. The green lights of the hoverboards were covered, and she would never have seen him if she wasn't looking.

She pulled herself to her feet as he landed on the thin ledge beside her.

"What'd you find, bug boy?"

"Only Jinx gets to call me that," he grumbled. Sevika just looked at him expectantly.

He sighed. "Lest was right. She's on the large ship, cabin right in the middle. There's a lotta soldiers." He shifted nervously. "Are you…what are you gonna do?"

She stomped out the cigarette. "Not a word about this to the rest of them, yeah?"

"I don't know if I can do that. Not even Jinx?"

"Fine," she grunted. "Can you wait til tomorrow? If any spies get a hold of this, we're all going down."

His eyes widened. "You think there's spies?"

"I think we'd be fools not to expect them. Noxus doesn't fuck around."

Ekko was still jittery. "I don't like this."

Sevika just waited, an eyebrow raised. *Come on, kid.*

Finally, he sighed. "It's for Zaun?"

"For Zaun," she said grimly.

* * *

They flew slowly over the water. Sevika hated how the board shifted with her tiniest movement, her stomach lurched every time. But Ekko kept them balanced with practiced ease.

The ship loomed closer.

"Round the left," Sevika hissed into his ear. "Watch the lookout."

"I know that," he hissed back. Flying slowly like this felt worse, she was sure they'd fall into the water at any moment. But she knew this was smarter. Less likely to draw a watchful eye. Red soldiers walked slowly along the decks, scanning the water.

Ekko drew them gradually closer to the hull. The metal loomed cold, clearly built to keep out heavy bombardment. They hovered right below the deck.

"Wait." Ekko whispered. "Am I coming?"

Sevika snorted. "Didn't think to ask that earlier?"

"Uh—"

"Nah, kid. I can handle this."

"You can handle a whole shipful of their best soliders?"

"I got a plan."

"Which is…?"

"Really fucking good. Top tier. One of my best."

He snorted.

"I need you as lookout though, okay? Hide somewhere, on this side. If I don't come back out in an hour…" Sevika paused. *Huh*. It had been a long time since she's really had people around her that she…might want to say goodbye to. Silco wouldn't want any sentimental messages. She thought about Jinx.

"Tell Mel that she…" Sevika sighed. "That she's pretty hot for a topsider."

Ekko shook with a silent laugh.

Sevika just grinned, and leapt from the board. She clung to

the edge of the rail by her mechanical hand, patched hastily back together by Viktor. She waited a full minute in case anyone heard her. Sevika pulled herself up, and peeked over the edge.

A few soldiers patrolled slowly. One lookout. She swung across to a spot with a bit more cover, and pulled herself up when the lookout turned the other way. Sevika hated this kind of job, she wasn't made for sneaking. Just let her put her fist through someone. *Kid would've been helpful,* she thought ruefully. But Ekko couldn't come with her.

She prowled along the deck, closer to the centre cabin, keeping to the blind spots. She evaded one Noxian, then another. But a soldier stood still in front of the doorway.

Here we go.

She moved closer, then dashed forward before he could blink. The knife in her palm shot out, carving through the gap in his armour, straight into the lung. He gasped, and Sevika caught him as he dropped, laying him carefully to the ground so he made no noise.

Gotta go fast now.

She moved quickly down the corridor within. A soldier at the end spotted her, but fumbled with their horn as she dashed forwards. She slashed their throat cleanly.

Of course the boss if behind the big-ass doors.

Sevika steadied herself, then shoved them open.

She was in a large room. Every surface was stark and metal. A terrifying array of weapons decorated the back wall.

And in front of them, sat Ambessa Medarda. She looked up with a frown.

A flash of movement from the corner of her eye was the only warning Sevika had. That giant man somehow moved faster than a snake. He attacked viciously, and her arm barely kept up

with the flurry of blows.

"Wait!" she bit out. "I have something for the general."

The man grunted, pressing harder.

"Rictus," Ambessa called smoothly. He halted, his glare hot enough to cut steel.

The general rose to her feet. "Zaunite. To what do I owe the pleasure?"

The door burst open. "General!" a soldier shouted. "Intrud—" She stumbled to a stop at the sight of Sevika.

Ambessa sighed. "Who is in command tonight?"

"Uh—"

"Send whoever it is to me afterwards." Her voice sent the kind of shiver of fear down Sevika's spine that not many could evoke. She'd heard Silco use that tone too many times not to guess the poor soldier's fate. "Now, leave us."

The general turned her fierce gaze to Sevika.

"You fought well on the docks." Her gaze travelled to Sevika's arm. "I take it you have a collection of those, then?"

Sevika gave a cruel smile at the sight of the bruises on her throat. "Oh, don't worry. There's plenty more where that came from."

"I was under the impression that you're here to offer me something." Ambessa prowled forwards. "This is rather poor diplomacy."

"I don't fucking like diplomacy," Sevika grunted. "I got something you want, and you can help me. Business."

Ambessa's eyes glinted, curious. "Well?"

"Your daughter," Sevika said. Her lip curled a little. "She thinks she's one of us."

Ambessa's careful expression twitched. "Yes, she's gotten herself in rather deep with you rebels."

Sevika snorted. "I'll say."

Ambessa stared at her for a moment. "I see." She raised her eyebrows. "My daughter doesn't usually partake in the local colour. She really is invested here, isn't she?"

"She doesn't?" Sevika grinned. "I guess I really am as special as she says I am."

Ambessa looked disgusted. "If you just came here to brag about lying with my daughter, I'll have you drowned in your horrible river."

Sevika almost laughed. "No. I'm here because she's planning something." Reaching into her jacket pocket, she drew out a small, round gemstone.

It glowed red.

Ambessa frowned as she plucked it from Sevika's hand. "I thought this Hextech of yours was blue?"

"It is," she said. "One of our scientists cracked this the other day. It's even more volatile." Sevika crossed her arms. "She's going to use it to kill you."

Something flickered in Ambessa's tawny eyes. "We have a tumultuous relationship, but she certainly lacks the stomach to carry out anything so dramatic as that."

Sevika shrugged. "Fine. But when she comes for you, that –" she nodded at the stone. " – is the only thing that'll stop it."

"How?"

"I'm no scientist," she snapped. "Do you have any idea the shit I might be getting myself into by giving this to you?"

"So why bother?" Ambessa said coldly.

"Just throwing my weight over to the winning side," she said. "I've heard plenty about Noxus, and I've heard of you, Ambessa Medarda. You don't lose."

Ambessa turned away, studying the gemstone closely. "I take

it your people don't care much for loyalty, then."

Sevika rolled her eyes. "Why do topsiders always have to be shitty people *pretending* to be better than the rest of us? From what Mel's said, you're loyal to your family, and no one else." She shrugged. "Well, so am I."

She stared into the gemstone. "So, protection for you and yours, I take it?"

"Yeah. A new start in Noxus when Piltover burns the Lanes to the ground." Sevika cocked her head. "Bit of money to help us get going."

"Is that all?" Ambessa said drily.

Sevika grinned a little. "I'll have to think on it. You gotta win the war first."

Ambessa gave her a long, searching look. Something warred in her eyes. "My daughter truly plans to kill me?"

"Plans to," she said. "She really doesn't like you. And, don't I know it –" she snorted. "– there's nothing like a child's hatred for their parent."

"There is nothing so *fickle*," Ambessa said bitterly. She nodded. "Thank you…?"

"'Zaunite' will do."

"How will I find you to thank you, once I defend myself against my…overzealous daughter?"

"Not many one-armed revolutionaries in the Lanes," Sevika grunted. "You'll figure it out if you need to. But I'll find you."

"Hmm," Ambessa's shrewd eyes looked at her from head to foot. "That is one option." Her gaze shifted infinitesimally to her right-hand man. "Did she kill any of us?"

Rictus nodded, once, hatred in his eyes.

Sevika darted backwards the same moment that Ambessa jerked her head, and Rictus struck at her with his wide, vicious

sword.

"If you'd only stunned them, I would have been happy to oblige you, Zaunite," Ambessa sighed. "But now that I have the gemstone…I really don't see a use for you."

Sevika evaded another crushing blow. "*Fucking* topsider honour," she growled. "I hope Mel spears you like a fish."

Ambessa snorted. "In a way, so do I."

Sevika grunted as Rictus' blade sliced off part of her elbow. She turned to the doors, and ran hard.

She glanced down the corridor she came from, to see dozens of soldiers standing ready for her. *Shit.* She looked the other way.

A window.

There was no time to think before she was running. Blades buried themselves into the walls round her. She crashed through the window into the night, and leapt wildly into thin air.

Come on, Ekko, if you dozed off I'm going to kill y—

Then someone grabbed her metal wrist. She dangled for a moment, hoping the soldier's blade hadn't ruined anything structurally important in the arm. She did *not* want to get fished out of that water.

"Go!" she yelled, as guns began to fire from the ship.

Ekko dragged them off into the night.

* * *

Ambessa

"She fled, General," Rictus said with a deep frown.

"Damn," Ambessa growled. "Well, no great loss, dead or alive. She can't tell her friends about the gemstone anyway, not without them tossing her into the river for the betrayal. Mel still won't know we have this."

He came to the desk, staring at the red stone. "It could all be a clever ploy. How can we trust a rat like that?"

"It could be," Ambessa mused.

"You do not believe so." It wasn't a question.

Ambessa gritted her teeth. *Stupid, foolish girl. To not only join them but sleep with them? I taught you better.*

Intimacy is threat.

"I believe that my daughter is a *good person*." Ambessa said, scathing. "And that those on the bottom rung will do anything to climb a little higher."

26

Vi / Jayce

Vi

Vi leapt from the balloon while it was still several storeys from the ground. She landed fist-first in the courtyard of Stillwater. The gauntlet groaned as it absorbed the impact. Her bones rattled, and she grinned as the feeling stoked her anger hotter. The stark outline of the prison rose before her against the night sky. *Never thought I'd see the day.* But hundreds of Zaunites had wanted in, after hearing about cracking open Stillwater like a nut. They only had a day to plan, but they had to strike fast before Noxus' runestones reached the prison and its guards.

Shimmer-suits swooped around her. Enforcers cried out in the courtyard, scrambling for their weapons. Suits crashed into the guardtowers like boulders, stopping any alarms from ringing out over the water to the city. They targeted the boats and the shuttle, tearing Enforcers from the controls.

No one leaves until we say they do.

Vi swept forwards. She crashed through a line of shields

before they had a chance to form up. She kept a close eye out for any green crackles. There were back-up chem-mitts tied to her belt, at the ready. But there was no sign of those Noxian stones.

She tore guns from Enforcer hands, remembering every time a rifle butt had been shoved into her stomach. Viktor's knee in the Lanes, that first day with Jayce. Vi broke the guns apart like toys with a savage glee.

She stalked towards a prisoner shuttle, sitting dark on its tracks. Vi thought of that day, years ago. The cold, chain heavy on her wrists as she left the carriage, and looked up at the prison for the first time. She'd had no idea how long she would be trapped there, cooped up by an Enforcer for some other bullshit she'd had nothing to do with. No trial, of course, not for *chem-rats who were probably up to no good anyway.*

Vi dug her glowing fingers into the shuttle's hull. With a gutteral scream, she tore it apart like it was paper. Years of holding herself back, in that cell, unable to fight without being thrown into a deeper, darker cell. Her whole life in the Lanes, head down, afraid of Piltover retaliation.

No more.

Jinx zoomed overhead, cackling wildly. Vi stumbled back from the wreckage. She met her sister's bright, glowing eyes, and began to laugh. The rage and helplessness she'd held for so many long years lessened a little in her chest.

"No MORE," she shrieked. Jinx gave her chattering cry, and Zaunites around them called out, too, as they shoved Enforcers into the ground.

Vi raised her fist, and swept towards the Stillwater doors. She heard Jayce bellowing from the centre of the courtyard, where he fought beside Renni against a crowd of Enforcers. Zaunites

began to collect around her.

Vi faced a line of thick, impenetrable shields, a wall of metal, ready. But Vi could almost taste their fear against the furious Undercity as they guarded the doors.

Jinx hefted a luridly-decorated rocket launcher above them. She giggled as something arched over their heads.

With a *boom* and flare of blue flames, the doors disappeared. Enforcers fell like toy soldiers. The Zaunites swept over them, pinning them to the ground. Vi marched on, into the dark prison.

Together, they smashed everything they could see. Vi swung her hand high overhead and brought it down with a *crash* of splintering wood into the desk. The place they wrote their lies, and changed the course of countless Zaunite lives with just a rubber stamp. As she walked away, Jinx lit it up in pink flames.

She drove deeper and deeper, tearing through over-designed metal bars. *They even have to make their cages pretty and golden*, she thought as she pulled them from the walls. Jinx danced behind her, scattering her metal monkeys. Jayce held up the rear. His face was grim and determined. The swings of his hammer were almost perfunctory compared with her wild attacks.

We'll get around to your friend, jawline. Got some fun to have first.

They reached the prisoners' quarters. Vi almost marched forward to tear open every cell herself. Then she sighed, and slammed down on a lever beside her. The cell doors rolled open. Zaunites behind her raced forwards, pulling loved ones into their arms, sobbing.

She moved deeper. They subdued Enforcers as they went, any who tried to resist. Her anger gave way to a deep satisfaction, sitting in her chest like a warm stone, as more Zaunites flooded

free.

They went methodically now, liberating the prisoners block by block. Renni peeled off to the deeper levels, and the prisoners kept in the dark. Vi shoved back memories of those holes. She knew she didn't want to face that place if she didn't have to, even though the anger that raged in her blood would carry her though.

Vi glanced at Jayce. He peered into every cell as they went. But she knew the Kiramman would be kept up somewhere nice and cosy and comfortable.

"This way," she said grimly, taking him to an elevator. Jinx prowled in behind them.

They descended. Vi was still breathing heavily, riding a heady cocktail of emotions. She almost smashed her fist into the wall, then stopped herself with a chuckle. *Once we've gotten back up, maybe.*

"See, doesn't it fucking feel better to let go, sis?" Jinx said. She danced on the balls of her feet. "Make them goddamn *afraid*."

"If you literally say 'I told you so', I'm throwing you in a cell," she grinned.

"You wouldn't—" The doors dinged open. Jinx landed a punch on her shoulder before zapping away. Vi barely felt it through the adrenaline. The haze of rage, though, was beginning to fade, satiated a little by the sight of twisted metal bars and Zaunites embracing.

They entered another cell block. There were only a couple of Enforcers there. They scrambled for their weapons before Vi knocked them out cold. This area was nicer, the floors cleaner. No smell of piss in the air.

Jayce threw the lever, and all the doors rattled open. A few prisoners walked out timidly, eyeing the dust and blood that

coated them. Vi ignored them as they approached the cell at the end.

* * *

Jayce

Caitlyn stood at the centre of the cell. She had her fists up, every muscle ready to fight. Her dark hair was loose and ragged around her face, eyes red. Then she saw him.

"Jayce." Her voice cracked. She stared at the blood on his hammer. The shadow of something jerked in his chest, something akin to shame. He knew how he looked – like a monstrous sump-thing, tattered and wild. Piltover Jayce from two, three years ago would have stared at him like that, too. But the pang of guilt was hollow. He thought of the people running out of the cells above him, breathing fresh air for the first time in decades, and it faded completely.

"Cait, are you alright?"

She just stared at him, then Vi. "What the hell is going on?"

"Prison break," Vi said. The savage look in her eye flared. Jayce had seen moments of it before, in the Lanes, on his first day, as she kicked the wall after that boy…

But something in Vi seemed unleashed, finally. Free. She grinned at Caitlyn. "For Zaun. And for you, I guess. You're welcome."

"Are you— you *cannot*—"

"If we're really bothering to rescue the *rich little blue-belly*—" Jinx spat from outside the cell, "—we probably gotta move soon.

They're gonna start really burning this hellhole down."

"You're going to burn down Stillwater!?"

"You're welcome," Jayce echoed quietly.

Caitlyn ran her hands through her hair. Her chuckle had a worrying edge to it. "Sure, why not? Get throw into prison by my own *mother,* get broken out by the psychotic rebels trying to annihilate Piltover—"

"Don't make me leave you here." Vi's voice was a deep growl. She closed in on her, faces inches apart.

"You saved me for a reason out there," Jayce said. He had to believe she would listen, this time. *Please.* "And look what they did to you for it."

Her frame trembled. Jayce had never seen her coming apart like this. She was fixed by Vi's glare, like a rabbit before a wolf.

"Salo – and that Medarda general – they say such horrible things, about you. And then Mother started to say them too, and I don't know—" she choked off. "I don't know what to do."

"You gonna keep being their blue little pet?" Vi snapped.

Caitlyn shivered. "I…No. No, I can't."

"You gonna say some bullshit about *reprimands* today? Tell us to wait on Piltie justice to make things right?"

Cait blushed a little. "No." Her voice was firmer.

Vi pulled back, breathing heavily. "Good, cupcake."

"I *told* you not to call me that." Her hand curled into a fist.

"If you get that stick out of your ass and do something useful, I'll call you anything you want," Vi said with mocking sweetness.

"You keep saying what you *won't* do." Jayce left the rest of the thought hanging, open. He remembered Cait's complaining about the Enforcer Academy, and the corruption she witnessed. The stuffy dinnertable conversations, the galas with delicate, political negotiations that Cassandra forced her into. The

horrible things she had to overlook.

Caitlyn crossed her arms. Some of her sharpness came back into her face. "Things are looking difficult for Zaun right now, are they not? The Noxian anti-magic neutralises your military advantage."

"It doesn't *neutralise* it, maybe it limits us a bit, but—"

"And this prison break," she cut in, shaking her head in amazement. "It's clever. And…desperate."

Vi curled her hands into fists, gauntlets hissing. "Fucking Piltie, you don't know anything—"

"Vi," Jayce cut in. "We still have the Noxians, the Piltover council, and a lot of Enforcers to deal with before we're really free."

"You do," Caitlyn said slowly. Then she gave a terrifying smile.

"If Cassandra Kiramman were eliminated, that may help, no?"

Jayce's breath caught. "Cait."

"Eliminated?" Vi blinked.

"She's…done things you don't know about. I found…I went looking, after we…spoke." Her eyes flicked to Vi. "There's some horrible skeletons in Piltover's closet. In *her* closet."

"I'm shocked," Vi scoffed.

"Cait, what do you mean?" Jayce said deliberately.

Rage burned in her eyes. "She threw me in this— hole, like a child on time-out. I have no idea how long she would have kept me in here." She sighed, cooling. "It would certainly help your war effort, wouldn't it?"

"To do *what?"*

"To kill my mother for you."

"No," he breathed. *She...she couldn't...Cassandra?*

"You think you got the guts, cup—" Caitlyn glared at Vi, and she cut herself off, giving Caitlyn a long, appraising look.

"Kill her?" Vi said slowly. "Not gonna tell us to chuck her in Stillwater to rot?"

"She'd get free. She has too many allies, could easily twist the laws if she wanted to." Caitlyn looked slowly over the bars, regret in her eyes. "Besides, this place should burn."

"But…kill her?" Jayce said. He took in the stubborn set of Cait's jaw, so familiar to him. It came out when he tried to persuade her to let it go when her mother frustrated her, or to take a break from a case to eat. It all felt so long ago. A wave of grief caught him by surprise. *I miss you, friend. What have this world done to us?*

He stepped closer and rested a hand gently on her shoulder. "Are you sure, Cait?"

She met his gaze. He could see the conflict within her, but she did not flinch.

"If she dies, you'll be free."

"I mean, it's more complicated than that, the Noxians…"

"You'll handle that," she said. "You all keep handling us *topsiders* frighteningly well." She cut Vi a glare. "Wait, am I being handled right now?"

"Are you kidding? I never would have thought of talking you into *killing* your own mum." Her eyes bored into Caitlyn's. "Do you know what you're saying? To kill your parent, it…can tear someone apart. Even when it's an accident."

"Yes, I know what I'm saying! I can *do* this."

Vi looked at her for a long, long moment, weighing her up. Finally, she nodded. "Alright."

"Good." Caitlyn crossed her arms, resolute. "Well, if we do this, we have to go now."

"Now?"

"There's a Council meeting. Down in the vaults. You can take

me, disguise yourself as Enforcers, say you rescued me from the—" She cut herself off. "You know."

"Stinking crazy sump-rat terrorist hoard?" Vi said, lip curling.

Caitlyn winced. "Yes."

"How do we know it's not a trap?"

"If it isn't, I'm offering you a shot at the whole *council*." She shrugged. "If it is a trap, just the three of you die, right? The fight will go on."

Jayce flinched, even though he knew her utilitarian side well. She had always been the designated spider-squisher between them.

"You got us there," Vi said with a snort.

Jinx dashed into the cell with a flash of pink. "I heard a big, proper *boom.* I think they're getting started." She looked gleeful. "What are we doing with the blue-belly?"

Vi sighed. "Being blue-bellies. Let's see if any of the ones in the corridor are our size."

Jinx screwed up her face. "Do I have to?"

"Do you want to kill the council?"

Jinx gasped, bouncing on her toes. "Oh, then I'll wear anything!"

27

Mel

Mel sat, turning the knife over in her fingers. It was a beautiful piece of work. Jayce truly was an artist. The lines on its handle and the centre of the blade had the same stark boldness as the ones on her own skin. Her cheeks warmed as she ran her fingertips along it. He had replicated them exactly, with a flattering attention to detail. Viktor's red gemstone glowed, embedded in the pommel.

Jayce had handed it over gingerly a few days earlier, eyes were creased with worry.

"Gods, Mel, are you sure you want to do this?"

She gave him a grim smile. "Who else will? You?"

"I— I mean...maybe a real fighter. You know Sevika would kill for you, but then...that's not really saying much." His eyes widened. "That's not what I meant! I'm sure she really likes you! You two at the Last Drop the other night looked very cosy—"

She cut him off, putting him out of his misery. "Thank you, Jayce. But I must be the one to do this. No one else knows her well enough."

That was certainly still true.

Mel sat in an overstuffed, musty-smelling armchair at the Firelight tree. She looked over at the old fighting mannequin beside her. She was meant to be practising with the blade, shaking off the cobwebs of her fighting skills.

Instead, she stared at the red gemstone. She'd been absorbed in its light for gods knows how long, hours by now.

Will I finally do it? Kill my own mother?

The woman had shoved Mel down her whole life, made her less than. Even in her own twisted kind of love, she hurt Mel over and over. And now, she was going to kill everyone in this wonderful city.

She gripped the blade's handle. *Kino would hate me forever.*

But he's gone. The Medarda family is done.

Mel looked up as footsteps padded towards her. Sevika approached with a swagger in her steps. A few Firelights followed close behind. *Gods, how does she make having a knife for a hand look so sexy?*

"Just got word. A Firelight spotted her, she's heading from the Council to the docks."

"A late meeting, I suppose," Mel mused. "And with minimal guards?"

Sevika shrugged. "I guess. But who cares, we can handle them. Time to go, princess."

Mel took the offered hand, hauling herself to her feet. Sevika paused for a moment, squeezing her fingers. But she didn't ask if she was okay, or if she could do this. *Kill her own mother.* Mel was deeply grateful. As touching as Jayce's concern was, he

didn't understand.

Lingering on brutal choices just made them more difficult. That was something Sevika knew well.

Mel squeezed back. Then, something pulsed in her chest. She drew her lips close to Sevika's, hovering there. Teasing.

Sevika snorted, a slow grin spreading over her face. She kissed her softly. "Come on. Don't want to be late for this one." Something flickered in her eyes. Fear? For her? *She really is more sentimental than she lets on.*

"I suppose not," Mel said. She eyed Scar behind her, and his hoverboard. She hated those things.

But together, Mel and the Firelights left the tree, speeding silently off into the night.

* * *

They drifted high over Piltover's shining streets, hidden in the night. Ekko flew at the front, scanning the city below them. He waved his arms, signalling to the other Firelights. Mel clung to Scar. She could feel how nervous he was.

As he should be. Am I sending them to their deaths, putting them up against battle-hardened Noxian soldiers?

Will this be my *death? Ambessa Medarda could kill me in her sleep.*

She breathed out, washing those thoughts from her mind. Her mother's lessons came to her. *Calm before battle, Mel.*

The Firelights drifted together into a tight formation. Mel peeked below, ignoring the twist in her stomach at the height. She saw the speck of Ambessa. Red guards were clustered

around her. Minimal guard, indeed.

Bold, Mother. I suppose you don't think us brave enough to strike at you?

Don't think me *brave enough, more like.*

She could see Ekko looking at her, waiting for permission. She raised a fist.

He raised his own.

The Firelights descended in a lethal, green-shimmering swarm. Guns and grenades blazed as the soldiers scrambled for their weapons. But they recovered impressively quickly, and Noxian spears flashed at the airborne threat. Dense metal shields held off the worst of the gunfire, as the street descended into battle. The soldiers warded the Firelights off with glowing green stones, but the Zaunites had no Hextech with them today. Just the weapons they were used to. They used them to devastating effect, holding their own easily.

Mel held tight to Scar as he zoomed to the ground. Ekko and Sevika landed first. Right in front of Ambessa.

Ekko flew away again, hovering, ready, as Scar and several Firelights descended on Rictus. Their job was to keep the terrifying man at bay.

Mel landed heavily behind Sevika. Her body trembled, but her mind was oddly still.

Ready.

Ambessa scowled at them as she took in the fight around her. "You think to attack me, little one?" she hissed.

"I think to kill you, Mother," she called out. Sevika stood tall, sizing up the general, eager for a re-match.

"How adorable. These rebels have led you astray, drawing you in with their dreams and sweet promises. But they will turn on you in a heartbeat." Ambessa glared at Sevika.

Sevika struck, fast and lethal. Ambessa evaded her mechanical hand and dealt a bone-crushing blow to the chest. Sevika grunted, but kept coming. Their blows were brutal now, not the little testing jabs of their earlier fight, when Ambessa evaluated Hextech. *This fight feels personal*.

Mel pulled a knife from her hip, a long, plain thing, no gemstone. As Ambessa whirled to strike Sevika, Mel darted in to slice it along the back of her thigh.

But she forgot how fast her mother was.

Ambessa stepped easily out of reach. Her knife cut through nothing.

"Mel, please. Don't make me live through this embarrassment. You're my daughter. Walk away now, and I'll let you live."

"Come, Mother. I know you a little better than that." Mel lunged again, knowing that Ambessa would – yes, sure enough – feint to the left. She managed to slice a thin line along her bicep. But all that accomplished was putting a hint of pride in her mother's eyes, along with rage.

Mel danced back. "Ambessa Medarda's own daughter publically defected from Piltover to side with a pack of crazed rebels. I've brought shame on House Medarda for generations." She grinned. "Unless, of course, *I* lead the House, and remake the very definition of Medarda honour."

Sevika gave a wide, sweeping strike at Ambessa's unprotected back with her hand-blade. But the general whipped around, landing a brutal punch on Sevika's well-broken nose. She staggered back, and Ambessa pulled a long, wicked blade from her belt.

No, Mel thought desperately, as she lashed out. But Sevika stumbled away from the general, giving Mel a hard look. *Go.*

"Where are your fox tactics today, child?" she said, turning

back to her, eyes taunting. "Perhaps these *rats* have actually taught you a thing or two about real fighting."

"Oh, they've taught me plenty, Mother," she said bitterly, steeling herself.

Mel fended off Ambessa's crushing blows, always so much stronger than her. But she'd learned to duck and weave against this woman her whole life. She gasped as the knife's handle smashed into her knee. But she kept moving through the pain, to land a long, deep cut to her other bicep. Ambessa hissed.

"Good," she growled, and anger surged in Mel. *She's still just playing with me.*

She looked inside herself for hesitation, and found none.

Let's do this.

She feinted a lunge at her mother. As she blocked, Mel abandoned her blade. It clattered at her feet.

Mel pulled Jayce's knife from her belt. The red glow of the gemstone lit up Ambessa's face. She watched the gemstone closely, amused.

"I see your little crystals come in different colours," Ambessa said indifferently. Anyone else would miss the hint of wariness in her eyes, waiting to see how Mel would use the blade.

"Planning to block me with those green witch-stones?" Mel taunted. Ambessa paused, eyes narrowing at her daughter's confidence.

"You have no idea what I'm capable of, Mother."

Mel surged forward, driving the knife towards her face.

Ambessa brought her arm up. There was a long, metal brace there, and as the knife descended, a panel clicked open, revealing a second red gemstone, ready to meet her stone for stone.

Clever.

Mel had no time to falter. Ambessa's forearm blocked the blow, and as Mel's arm slammed down against the metal, something in her wrist cracked. She gasped as pain raced up her limb.

Ambessa steeled herself, waiting for a detonating crack, an explosion of red, anything.

But it was blue Hex-light that burst forth from the point of contact, between knife and shield.

Mel grinned as she kept moving. She abandoned the knife at once, reaching smoothly for the one at her feet. Before Ambessa could react, she plunged it home. Deep into her mother's side, angled just so, to puncture her spleen. *Just as you taught me.*

Ambessa stumbled to one knee. She tried to fight back, but Mel was too quick. She pulled the knife out, and immediately brought it down again, plunging it into her chest. Ambessa gave a ragged gasp as the lung collapsed. Mel ripped the blade free again, then sank it into her chest on the other side, puncturing the heart's ventricle. Mel knew her mother far too well to leave her with just one wound.

Ambessa's legs finally gave way. Mel caught her head as she fell.

They collapsed to the ground together. Mel felt Ambessa's hot blood pumping quickly from the wound in her side. She gasped helplessly for breath, eyes wide. It was then that guilt began to curl inside her.

Mother. How could I?

Mel stroked her cheek.

"Y— you—" Ambessa croaked.

"Yes. I did. Got a sump-rat to sell you some tale about special, all-powerful gemstones." She brought the gemstone knife up, gripping its slippery hilt. Mel brought the pommel down and

smashed it into the red stone.

The glass cracked, revealing the blue light within.

"See? Just another Hex-stone."

"Trick— ed—"

"Well, you made it rather easy," Mel murmured. "I knew you would it find it unthinkable that these low-lives might seek more than power, that my faith may be well-placed. I know your cynicism all too well, Ambessa…and its limitations. I've fought it my whole life."

Mel felt a heavy presence at her back, and warm fingers rested on her shoulder. She didn't look up at Sevika, and Sevika didn't speak. Tears slipped from Mel's eyes, unbidden. But her vision was clear.

Ambessa struggled, and more hot blood gushed out of her. Her eyes were furious, and then…

That damn pride.

"Medarda," she breathed.

"Yes," Mel whispered, a shudder moving through her. Shame and guilt and…sweet relief.

"Mel…Ple—" Ambessa choked.

Mel reached for the blade again, placing the tip lovingly on her neck. "Of course, Mother. Whatever you need."

Her mother had made her practice merciful deaths, of course. With wild animals, caught in the Noxian cold.

Foxes and wolves alike.

Her slice through the carotid was clean and deep. Mel watched as blood washed down Ambessa's chest, and her mother's eyes fluttered closed.

Mel stayed there for a long time. Sevika stood over her. The fighting slowed, as Noxian soldiers gathered around them.

Mel jerked at the slam of Rictus' fist on his breastplate, then

the echo as the other Noxians followed suit. She blinked up at them. His heavy face was enraged, but resigned. He knew the rules of a Noxian transfer of power as well as she did.

The battalion was hers.

Mel looked at Sevika. Her slate eyes were softer than she'd ever seen.

"Did good, Mel," she murmured.

Mel gave a weak shrug, and turned back to her mother's body, holding her close.

28

Vi

The elevator was quiet as they descended into the bedrock. Vi avoided looking at herself in the reflection of the doors. Her skin was already crawling where the uniform touched it. *Never thought I'd see the day I put on a damn blue-belly costume.*

Jinx tugged at her Enforcer coat beside her, clearly just as uncomfortable. Jayce towered over them. His blank Enforcer mask putting a shiver down her spine. Caitlyn shifted nervously in the prisoner jumpsuit.

They'd gotten through the city without incident; three Enforcers with a hooded prisoner was nothing new, and word of the break at Stillwater earlier that night had yet to spread. Caitlyn led them to a nondescript building at the heart of Piltover, and to the entrance of the emergency Council bunker within. It was a secret Cassandra wasn't supposed to share with her daughter.

Jinx tugged at her Enforcer coat again, and Vi glared at her.

"Stay in character," she hissed.

"Shut up, sis," she grumbled. "There's no one else in here."

Vi sighed. "Sorry." *It's always her I snap at, isn't it? Come on, Vi.*

"Vi's right," Caitlyn said tightly. "We have to stay in character in there. This will need to be handled very carefully. My mother can be dangerous." She clenched her fists rapidly. *Not good*, Vi thought to herself. *She's too nervous.*

The doors dinged, and slid open smoothly.

"This way," said Caitlyn haughtily, but Vi could hear it was forced.

Jayce stepped out with them, then stopped by the doors.

"I'm going to be backup," he said quietly.

Caitlyn gripped his arm through the uniform. "You can't!" she said, desperate. "I *need* you."

"I'm sorry, Cait." His blank metal eyes turned towards Vi. "I don't want to croak again."

She gave him a slow nod. "Good call."

Jinx reached out a fist, respect in her eyes. He bumped it.

Jayce embraced Caitlyn tight. She stayed for just a moment, trembling.

"Fine," she snapped, breaking away. She started to walk brusquely down the corridor.

Vi gripped his arm, solemn. "If you hear anything…just get out, okay?"

"That's not what backup means."

"You don't have to play hero, Jayce, just save yourself."

"I'm in this, Vi," he said softly. "We all get out, or none of us do."

She swallowed around a lump in her throat. "None of us asked you to go this far, Jayce."

Vi hated the way the Enforcer mask covered his face, but she

could guess his expression by now. *Kind. And stubborn to a goddamn fault. Just like the best of us.*

"I know." He removed himself gently from her grasp. "Now, go. Save our people."

She hurried behind Caitlyn, the long, cold corridor stretching ahead.

The three walked in silence. Jinx checked her weapons, just a few choice options stashed away in the uniform. Vi checked her own; small chem-gauntlets tucked out of sight, and one Enforcer gun strapped to her hip. Her stomach turned as she brushed the grip.

"Hang on a sec," she said. Caitlyn jerked to a halt. Vi stepped forward and pulled on her handcuffs, making sure they were looked secure, but weren't locked. Caitlyn's gun, rescued from Stillwater, was strapped to her thigh under the jumpsuit. They could only hope she wasn't searched, or else everything would be over before it even began. One strategic tear meant she'd have easy access when the moment came.

To kill her own mother. Gods, this is going to go badly.

Vi looked up into wide blue eyes. "Look, you just have to get us in there. You aim for Cassandra, and Jinx and I will handle the rest of the councillors." Her fingertips brushed her knuckles, the skin smooth. "You got this, Caitlyn."

"Not cupcake?" She tried her best to smile, but it came out twisted.

"Would it help calm you down?"

"I am calm!" she snapped. Vi couldn't help chuckling, and Caitlyn huffed a laugh. "I can do this."

"Then let's *go*," Jinx grumbled, bouncing foot to foot.

"That's not how an Enforcer stands," Caitlyn said primly, walking on.

"That's not how a prisoner walks!" Jinx hurried after her. Vi just sighed as they fell into formation.

The three turned a corner. Several figures stood before the doors at the end, blue and gold. Vi swallowed down her nerves, making her steps wider. *More arrogant.*

"What's my name again?" she hissed to Caitlyn.

"Morgan."

"First name or last?"

"Does it matter?"

Guess not.

The tallest glared at them as they approached. Vi recognised him, holding back a scowl. *Top dog.* Just a few months ago, she'd watched first-hand on Piltie Patrol, as he shoved a Firelight into a wall. Watched him stand back as his officers laid into them.

"What's the meaning of this?" he barked. "Caitlyn Kiramman should be locked away in Stillwater."

"There's been an attack, sir," Vi said gruffly. She tried to soften her Undercity accent. "The sump-rats overwhelmed us. Stillwater has fallen. We managed to get the councillor's daughter out unscathed."

"There's no need for that kind of language against the Undercity, officer," he said. Vi was grateful for the mask as she rolled her eyes so hard she almost gave herself a headache. *Keeping your words tidy as you beat us and lock us away for life. Goddamn Pilties.*

"Sheriff, I have information from the attack that the Council must be aware of immediately." Caitlyn drew herself tall.

"I'm not letting a traitor in here!"

"I told you, Marcus," she said, voice softening, pleading now. *Good, cupcake.* "I saw my friend out there on the bridge, and I just…made a mistake, that's all. I swear, I saw something

in Stillwater. I have to tell Mother immediately. We're all in danger."

The sheriff looked her up and down with a frown.

"Marcus, please. You really believe I'd turn against everyone for, what, a group of criminals? We both know my mother only put me in Stillwater because she was upset. I'm no Undercity revolutionary."

Bit on the nose, but it'll do.

"Fine," he said finally. "You're an idiot, Kiramman, but you know better than that, at least." Jinx twitched, but thankfully no one seemed to notice. The sheriff turned and typed something into the keypad on the wall. The other three guards watched them closely.

The heavy doors opened with a grind. Vi assessed them quickly as they receded into the wall. *Thick as shit,* she sighed. *Hard to get through to get back out, even with Jinx's firepower.*

Within, she glimpsed a long, empty table. There was a long console against the wall, and its buttons glowed softly. The tall, blonde councillor was there, along with that stinking sump-lord, Hoskel. Rage surged through her, and Vi scowled at him under her mask. That strange woman with a clinking metal cuff stood at one end. Cassandra Kiramman slumped in a chair at the other, looking pale and weak.

Vi and Jinx moved to step inside, but the sheriff caught her by the arm. Her skin burned at his touch. *Fucking Enforcer,* her body screamed. She barely held back from punching him square in the face.

"Where do you think you're going?" he hissed.

"With the prisoner?"

He snorted. "Into a sensitive council meeting? Wait outside, Officer…?"

"Morgan, sir."

"Marcus?" Cassandra called from within. "What is my daughter doing here?"

"Mother, I—"

The sheriff cut her off with a glare. "She reports she has vital information for the Council."

"Let her pass," Hoskel snapped.

Marcus went to follow Caitlyn.

"Sheriff, please wait outside," Cassandra said.

"But, Councillor, she's a dangerous prisoner!"

"Hardly," Salo snorted. "We just locked her up to appease that general. Not that there was much point to that, in the end."

Shoola shuddered delicately. "Please, Salo! Ambessa's body is barely cold."

Body? Is the general...dead? A wide grin spread over her face. *Sevika and the girlfriend. Holy shit.*

That means this room of people are the only ones standing between us and Zaun's freedom.

"Leave us, Marcus," Cassandra insisted.

"Fine," he snapped. "Come on, you two."

The last thing Vi saw before the doors slid shut was the flicker of Caitlyn's wide, terrified eyes.

You're on your own, cupcake. Vi's limbs were almost thrumming with nerves. *She's hardly going to assassinate the entire Piltover council, is she?*

"Right," said the sheriff, turning to Jinx and Vi. "You can remove the masks now. Who are you, exactly?"

"Hello, Marcus," Jinx purred. Vi shifted her stance to face the other Enforcers. The sheriff frowned, suspicion dawning—

Jinx barely used her Shimmer for speed as she pulled out her gun. She fired, and Marcus slumped to the ground. The guards

scrambled for their weapons. Vi moved to subdue the Enforcer closest to her, but Jinx was faster. Three more shots, and they were all down.

"Goodbye, Marcus." Jinx blew out the puff of pink smoke from the gun's barrel. She turned to Vi, pulling off the mask with a grin.

"Not bad! Queen Red is dead, and we got everyone we need in one place." She inspected the doors. "These bad boys might be tough to crack, but I think I have just the thing…" She began pulling monkeys and gemstones out of her pockets. "Besides, we could just cut off their escape with one big blast, collapse the corridor, that would do it – "

"No," said Vi.

"Huh?"

She sighed. "We wait for Caitlyn."

Jinx cackled. "You think the Piltie's gonna actually do it? Wipe out her own mum? Come on, Vi, even you can't think—"

"Just trust me," she said, frowning at the doors. *We've got to find a way to listen in*.

"But that's *stupid*." Jinx started slotting together something out of gears and powder, sliding a gemstone into place.

"Jinx," she said, stepping close and laying a hand on hers, holding her still. "We're not blowing them all up. We're waiting for Caitlyn."

"You're actually joking," she snarled, eyes flashing pink. "Cupcake seems nice, it's a shame that she's caught in the crossfire. But we can get *every councillor* all in one go, and we'll even probably get out alive." She squinted at the makeshift bomb in her hands. "Probably."

"*Trust me*." Vi clung to those slim fingers. She thought of Jayce, now living the life of a Zaunite. Of Mel, defecting from

her status. Of Sevika, slowly coming to fight at her side, like the older sister she'd always tried to be for Jinx. She thought of Powder, and how even though she was gone, she still got to have Jinx. A sister. She thought of Silco and Bool, softening for their daughters. All those people at the Firelight tree, bickering and second-guessing and singing together and sharing food.

She thought of the look in Caitlyn's eye, deep fear alongside determination. Insisting that killing her mother was for the greater good, as her voice wobbled.

Which would win?

Vi walked beyond naivety, and beyond cynicism.

"*Jinx.*" She stared deep into her pink eyes. "I've trusted you lately, more than ever. I *need* you to trust me now."

Jinx's whole frame shivered. A million thoughts flickered across her face. She looked like she wanted to kill her.

"Fine!" she hissed. She broke away, kicking the wall. "Fine, fine, *fine,* goddamn *sisters*, fine—"

"We have to listen in to them," Vi said urgently, no time for thank-yous. She slid her chem-gauntlets into place over her knuckles.

Jinx threw her a poisonous look as she scrambled through her pockets. "Ekko made something, the sneaky little eavesdropper, hang on—" She pulled out a small disc with a glowing blue gemstone, shoving it at Vi. "You know if you get us all killed, I'll kill you."

"I will, too, sis, don't worry." Vi pressed the Hextech up to the thick door, and put her ear to it. She grinned as she heard voices, tinny but clear.

"...by her own daughter?" came Caitlyn's voice, trembling a little.

"Indeed!" came a low growl. Probably the sump-lord, Hoskel. "Obviously, the traitor Mel Medarda is removed from this council. I

would like to propose exiling her from the city entirely."

"Well, now that she and the Noxian forces have no doubt joined the Undercity, that may be wise," Cassandra said wearily. "Though possibly ineffective."

"Does the news of her death excite you, Caitlyn?" The voice was thin, reedy, and sharp as a whip. Salo. "You certainly antagonised the general. Threatened her at gunpoint, no less! Perhaps you're even sympathetic to the sump-rats!"

"I told you, I recognised Jayce Talis among the Zau— the undercity forces." Caitlyn's voice trembled. "When I saw General Medarda attack him, I reacted without thinking to defend an old friend. It was...incredibly rash of me." Her voice seemed come from the left side of the room. Near her mother. Good. Come on, cupcake.

"Now, what exactly is the information you bring from Stillwater?" Hoskel demanded.

"I...saw Jayce. He came to me. He's— He's with the rebels." she said. She sounded so nervous. Too nervous.

Jinx glared at Vi. "Anyone dead yet?"

"No," she whispered back. "Hush."

"And?" Hoskel said into her ear.

"It's his failed magic experiment that has given them this technology. He made it work somehow. Hextech, he called it."

"This is all because of Jayce*?" Cassandra gasped.*

"Damn traitors." A thump sounded. Hoskel's fist hitting the tabletop, probably.

"Very interesting, Kiramman," Salo drawled. Vi frowned at the disinterest in his voice. Why doesn't he care?

"You don't find that interesting, Salo?" came a smooth voice. That councillor with the weird collar, Shoola.

"Well, I've had a thought which I do find a little more interesting." Salo's cold voice sent a shiver down her spine. He sounded like he

was in the centre of the room, near the panel she had glimpsed there.

"What's happening?" Jinx hissed next to her.

"The blonde guy is up to something," Vi hissed back.

"Defeat now stares us in the face. Our Enforcers were completely unequipped to handle these animals, even before the might of Noxus joined them, stolen by that traitor. The sump-rats will overrun us within the week. Even if they don't, they'll never share these new technological advances with Piltover. The City of Progress will become an international laughing stock, bereft of any trade, riches, or respect. It will be the end of Piltover as we know it."

A sober silence followed his words.

"As such, I have a proposition," he said delicately. "For if we act now, we can avoid this future entirely."

"How?" said Cassandra.

Where the hell is Caitlyn?

"Just here, is the access to your very own air filtration system, Cassandra. It spares the sump-scum from the effects of the Grey." Salo gave a derisive snort. "And look at the gratitude they repaid you with."

"What are you doing, Salo?" said Shoola, cautious.

"This dial, here, will intensify the acids, to the point of lethality... and this button would deploy it throughout the Lanes."

Vi froze, squeezing the Hextech tight.

"What!" Jinx demanded.

"They're going to kill everyone," she breathed.

"Vi, we have to—"

"Just wait, Jinx!" *Come on, cupcake, come on—*

Caitlyn's voice was weak. "Salo, that's disgraceful."

"See reason, Caitlyn," Cassandra said carefully. "What other choice do we have? This is a question of survival. Piltover depends on us!"

"I don't know why we haven't done it sooner," Hoskel muttered.

Vi squeezed her hand into a fist as she saw red.

"Vi—" said Jinx.

"Jinx," she said. "Trust me." *Gods, come on.*

"You can't—" Caitlyn choked out. Then, so soft that Vi almost couldn't hear... "I can't..."

Shit, shit, shit, SHIT—

Vi heard a loud clatter, then a cry from within.

The door beneath her hands shuddered. She stared at Jinx. "Shit."

With a flash of pink, Jinx's guns were in her grip, eyes wild. Vi barely had time to get the Enforcer's gun in her hands before the doors slid open.

Caitlyn stood beside her mother, breathing heavily, terrified. Her shackled hand hovering over the door button beside her.

Salo whipped around from the console at the back of the room, staring at them. His face turned savage as he took in the sisters. His fist began to descend over a button in the centre—

But Jinx was too fast. Her bullet hit him dead between the eyes. Salo dropped. Vi cried out as his arm struck the console as he fell, but nothing switched or pressed as he fell. *One inch to the side, and everyone in the Undercity would've...*

With another flash, Jinx fired at Hoskel, hitting him square in the chest. He slumped silently to the table.

Cassandra cowered in her chair as Vi approached. White-hot, blinding rage filled her. Her gauntleted hands wrapped around the councillor's neck, the skin like paper.

"You call us scum?" she growled. "You call us *animals?* At least I have the courage to look you in the eyes before I kill you."

Those wide, blue eyes, usually so poised, were filled with venom now. Cassandra gasped raggedly against her hand,

unable to speak.

"Vi, I'm sorry," Caitlyn sobbed beside her. "She's my mother. I couldn't."

Vi panted as the rage burned inside her. Vander's kind eyes filled her mind, then Silco's cold stare. Her mother's fuzzy face, and her fathers. *What will it be, Violet?* she thought to herself. *More violence, or weakness?*

"Go on, sis," Jinx hissed from across the room.

She stared into the eyes of Piltover, and saw Cassandra's bone-deep fear.

No more.

Vi threw the woman back into the chair, turning away bitterly.

No. No more.

Jinx stood beside Shoola, barrel pressed hard to her temple. The woman was on her knees, shaking hands held high in the air. Vi met Jinx's cold gaze, and shook her head.

No, Jinx. Come on, it's over. The Council is dead—

Then Vi felt a shift beside her.

"Mother, no!" Caitlyn cried.

Cassandra leapt from the chair. A wild energy possessed her frail frame. She ran for the console. "I won't let you *scum get away with*—!" she screamed, feral.

Vi reacted without thinking. She fired blindly.

The councillor's body fell to the floor.

"Mother…" Caitlyn sobbed, rushing towards her. She fell to her knees, turning her over. Sightless blue eyes gazed at the ceiling.

Vi heaved in deep lungfuls of air, watching Caitlyn's face as she cried. Vi dropped the Enforcer's gun, her hand oddly numb.

I hate these things. Give me fists any day.

Jinx stared at Cassandra, weapon still pressed to Shoola's

head. The last councillor of Piltover. Jinx's finger trembled over the trigger.

Vi reached for Caitlyn's abandoned handcuffs, and walked slowly over to them.

"Jinx," she breathed. Jinx flinched, but did not look away from Shoola. Vi pulled Shoola's hands gently behind her back and cuffed her, moving very carefully. She left a heavy hand on her shoulder, feeling the councillor's tremors.

"Jinx. Enough. It's done."

She blinked, glancing at Vi, then fixating on the councillor once more. Her arm shuddered. She looked at Vi again. Pink fury burning there.

Finally, slowly, Jinx lowered her weapon. Shoola curled in on herself, shaking violently. Caitlyn's sobs filled the room.

"If you're sure, sis." Her voice was oddly detached.

Weariness crashed over her.

"Yes," she murmured. "I'm sure."

Vi walked over to Caitlyn. She was shaking Cassandra's shoulders, frantic. She looked up at Vi. Her eyes had a broken quality that Vi had seen too many times before, as people clutched dead loved ones.

But maybe there'll be less from now on.

"I couldn— I'm sorry, I couldn't kill her, I'm sorry, I said I could, but— my *mother*, I couldn't…"

"I know," Vi murmured. She felt strangely empty. "It's alright, cupcake. I knew you couldn't."

Caitlyn hiccupped. "You did?"

"Yeah. I knew you didn't have the guts to actually kill her, but I hoped you'd pull through for us anyway."

Caitlyn bowed her head. "Thank y—" She choked on the words. "—for doing it. For me."

"You *hoped*?" Jinx hissed. "That monster was going to *kill all of Zaun*. You risked everyone's lives because—"

"Of hope," Vi said, crouching beside Cassandra's body. "Yeah. I did."

V

Act V — Aftermath

29

Caitlyn

Caitlyn shivered inside her coat at the biting wind blowing in off the bay, drawing the high collar close around her face. The group of Zaunites, Piltovians, and Noxians eyed each other off, wary. Stillwater still smouldered in the distance. It had been two days since the prisoners' escape.

Two days without Mother.

Caitlyn fiddled with something between her fingers. The seal of House Kiramman. Her father had handed it to her that morning.

"I don't know what exactly happened down there, Cait," he said, touching her shoulder gently. "But it wasn't your fault."

No, it wasn't.

But…should it have been?

The rollercoaster of images filtered through her mind again, as it did every time she thought of her mother. Her kind face, that little smile of praise when Caitlyn brought her a good mark.

The way her lips pressed together when Caitlyn disagreed with her. The cruel twist as she spat out the word *sump-rat*. And finally, her pale cheeks as she lay on the bunker floor, lifeless.

Her stomach roiled again, and she flipped the seal over in her fingers.

The Zaunites clustered together against the rail. That mercenary with the mechanical arm lounged, blowing cigarette smoke out over the bay. Jinx and a boy with white hair sat cross-legged on a hovering board, floating over the water. They were within earshot, but seemingly disinterested in the proceedings, heads bowed together.

Jayce stood nearest to her. His eyes were soft, almost worried as he watched her. That thin, beautiful scientist brushed his elbow with his fingertips. *Viktor*. His new *partner*. Cait felt jealousy twinge in her gut, and almost rolled her eyes at herself.

Mature, Cait. Of course Jayce hasn't been your friend these past few months. Piltover almost killed him and everyone he loves. Your own mother hated them enough to try and wipe him all out...and you almost didn't even stop it. She wanted desperately to talk to him again. He, alone, might be able to understand how she felt. Living inside of Piltover made her skin crawl, but it was also her only home.

But then, Jayce had never had to grapple with having a murderous mother.

Maybe there's one *other person who understands how I feel right now.*

Mel stood apart from the Zaunites and Piltovians. She was clad now in striking Noxian red and black, though one green cog shone, pinned in her shoulder. *For Zaun?* Ambessa's giant of a right-hand man was not with her, which made Caitlyn wonder. Mel had spun a tale that transfer of power via matricide within

Noxus was not uncommon, and the soldiers were now squarely under her command. But things may not have been as smooth as she made it seem. Her expression was amazingly calm and regal. *How is she holding it together right now?*

"Gods, I don't think this will go well," Shoola muttered beside her. She held a thin, paper cylinder. Within was a grudgingly signed version of the agreement delivered to them by Zaun just weeks ago. The woman's usual poise had evaporated since the bunker, replaced by a sense of defeat that Caitlyn was beginning to feel as well.

How are we going to lead Piltover out of this mess?

Vi leaned against the railing opposite her. She looked as relaxed as if she were unwinding at her favourite bar. She chatted quietly with the slum-lord Silco, though her eyes watched Caitlyn's fidgeting fingers. Her gaze was as unreadable as ever.

Caitlyn kept trying to hate her, and found she couldn't.

"Have a bit of hope, Shoola," Caitlyn said softly.

Vi cleared her throat, pushing off from the rail. She looked around at those gathered. "Alright. Let's do this."

Shoola laced her hands tightly in front of her. Caitlyn knew her well enough to see she was containing a tremble, though her voice was steady.

"I, Councillor Shoola, alongside Caitlyn Kiramman, represent the interests of the citizens of the city of Piltover—"

"Are you still a councillor if no council remains?" cut in the beautiful scientist, arching an eyebrow.

"The future of Piltover's governance is still in question," was all Shoola said. She and Caitlyn had debated well into the night already. Do they continue with a council? Elect a single ruler? Representatives from the merchant guilds were enraged, the

Enforcers demanded blood for Marcus' murder, and for the Enforcers at Stillwater. Piltover wanted the Undercity crushed. But, as the only remnants of Piltover's ruling body, both she and Shoola agreed. They had seen up close the might, and the mercy, of Zaun.

And their hands were tied.

"Nonetheless, we represent Piltover," Caitlyn said, her voice flat. "And…the city's unconditional surrender."

A disbelieving silence settled over the group. There was awe in the Zaunites' eyes.

"History, in the making," Silco breathed.

"Yes. Congratulations." Caitlyn was unable to keep the bitterness out of her voice. Vi looked at her, and Caitlyn could see the same curious mix of emotions there that she'd seen in the bunker. Standing over Cassandra's body.

Rage, sorrow…and relief.

"So, no Enforcers in Zaun?" the mercenary growled.

"No," Caitlyn said softly.

"Your laws—"

"You are a sovereign nation," she snapped. "Figure out your own laws."

"And we can expect no reprisals from Piltover for the meothds with which our sovereignty was won?" Viktor's eyes narrowed.

"We can promise that there will be no coordinated attack from Piltover itself, nor our Enforcers." Shoola straightened. "If there are any unofficial attacks, well…you left our rule in tatters. There's only so much we can do to prevent that. And you've shown yourselves perfectly able to defend your…nation."

Silco frowned. "That is not altogether comforting in the wake of—"

"Fine," Vi said firmly. She shrugged at him. "We won, buddy.

She has a point."

"…very well." His gaze lingering on Shoola. "We can, indeed, handle ourselves. Make sure Piltover does not forget that. I trust this peace of yours about as much as I trust a dog not to shit."

"Fine," Shoola snapped. "As long as *we* have no reason to defend ourselves from *your*—"

"How many times do we have to tell you," Viktor hissed. "We're not interested in your shiny little—"

"*Fine.*" Vi cut him off with a glare. "Easy thing to promise, right? We're not attacking Piltover. We told you. Got enough shit to figure out without seizing your stupid city."

Shoola crossed her arms. She hid it well, but Caitlyn could see she was frayed to the end of her rope.

"Speaking of governance," Caitlyn interjected. "How will Zaun be organising itself? With whom will Piltover liaise? A council of your own? A monarch?"

"Who fucking knows," the mercenary muttered. "Our council room is a bar right now."

"We'll get back to you about that," Vi said, lips quirking.

"And, on the defence of Zaun," Caitlyn said, looking at Mel. "Will Noxus linger in our city, Mel?"

Silco gave a sly grin. "I do believe it's General Medarda now, is it not? Our condolences, of course."

Mel lifted her chin. *So calm.* "General will do, yes. We will return to our own shores. Though make no mistake about the allegiance of Noxus, now that I lead our people. If Zaun calls upon us…you would not believe the speed with which we can come to their defence." Mischief flashed in her eyes.

Caitlyn shivered. She and Shoola exchanged a worried look. *How the gods are we going to pull Piltover through this? I'm not a*

damn politician.

Mother would know how to talk with the merchants, and placate the Enforcers, and guide the public to accept Zaun. She gripped the Kiramman seal tight enough to cut skin. *Except, she never chose to do that, did she? Instead, generations of my family let this happen to these people. And now the consequences have come for us all.*

Jayce stepped forward, still watching her. "Let's take a break?"

"Fine." Shoola walked over to the mercenary and gestured to her cigarette. "May I?"

She gave her a crooked grin, pulling a case from her pocket. "Sure thing."

Caitlyn smiled to herself as she watched the two women smoke together. She jumped as Jayce touched her elbow, his hand as large and warm as always.

"Hey, Cait," he murmured.

She gave out a long sigh that she didn't even know she'd been holding.

"Hey, Jayce."

"Look, Vi told me everything that happened. I'm…I'm sorry."

Caitlyn blinked at him, lost for words for a moment. "Do you…well…do you think you can…come visit me? Now that things are…" *Better?* "…different."

"I may need a formal pardon," he said, almost smiling. "Think you can arrange that?"

"Oh, yeah." She flipped over the Kiramman seal. "I think I can manage that."

"I'd like that," he said softly. "And…can I come see Mamá?"

She reached blindly for his hand. "Yes. *Yes.* Of course. We can tell her everything."

"I missed you, Cait."

She just squeezed his hand, so warm and solid in hers.

Vi walked slowly towards them, as did Mel, a cautious look on her face. The silence hung heavy and awkward for a moment between the three of them. *Piltover, Zaun, and Noxus.*

"Two dead mums, huh?" Vi ran her hand through her pink hair. The movement seemed almost nervous.

Caitlyn snorted. She saw something deep and painful in Mel's eyes, before her lips twitched.

"The fate of three little nations on our shoulders. Only a couple millennia of legacy to unwind." Mel's voice trembled slightly.

Vi snorted. A nervous laugh bubbled up inside Caitlyn. Jayce's fingers gripped hers, and she swayed into him.

Jayce is here. Thank the gods.

"I mean, Mel and I…we were just ah, speeding up the unwinding process, hey, Mel?" Vi said. Mel's green eyes widened.

"I mean, at least *you* didn't lose your nerve," Caitlyn said. That raw laugh burst out of her again. Mel looked even more shocked.

Then she gave an undignified snort. "Well, it looks like we both needed an attractive woman to help us kill our violent mothers, Caitlyn. Though I couldn't get Sevika to actually do it for me. Well played."

Caitlyn gasped.

"You gotta be fucking—" Vi glared at Mel.

Caitlyn began to laugh so hard her stomach hurt. Vi blinked. A grin began to spread over her own face.

"Cait—" Jayce murmured, and she realised he was holding her up. She began to hiccup. Vi watched her, that weird mix of emotions there again. *Defiance...and guilt.*

"Look, um…sorry, cupcake. Kind of. For killing your mum. I

mean, she deserved it, but…"

Caitlyn pressed her face into Jayce's shoulder. Anger surged in her, the urge to hate the Zaunite. *So much easier than blaming myself. Or my mother.*

It dissipated slowly. "Yeah. Thank you. Kind of. And, sorry? For…" Her voice cracked. "Um, you know."

Vi laughed then. "The violence of your people? Look, just keep up trying to fix things, yeah?"

Caitlyn sighed. "I mean, I don't know where the gods to start." Mel suddenly looked as fragile as Caitlyn felt.

Vi turned, gazing down along the river. The crumbled remains of the bridge between the two cities stood there, silent.

"We start by rebuilding, Caitlyn. One stone at a time."

30

Mel

Mel watched Caitlyn and Shoola retreat back to Piltover. She rolled one of Sevika's cigarettes between her fingers. There was a determined set to Caitlyn's shoulders now. *I'll be damn curious to see how she goes against the elite of Piltover.* She didn't envy her.

Not that Mel had an easy path ahead of her.

The Zaunites bickered among themselves as they prepared to return to the Lanes. But there was a celebratory air among them. Though Silco had scoffed at the paper scroll when Shoola offered it, calling it *"empty words on flimsy promises"*, he stroked it now between long fingers.

Mel shook her head incredulously and blew out a stream of smoke, bumping Sevika's arm with her own. "I can't believe you actually pulled it off. The nation of Zaun."

"Got so little faith in us, do you?" she smirked.

"You must be joking. My faith in you all was so unthinkable

it killed my own mother." As Mel said the light-hearted words, she expected to feel some kind of twinge. Guilt, or grief…but there was nothing. *Maybe I should be worried about that.*

Sevika just looked at her, something sad in her lovely eyes. "I still can't believe she bought it when I gave her the fake crystal. Didn't even check to see if I was talking shit about it being *the only defence possible against our crazy new gemstones."* She snorted.

Mel shook her head. "As I told you at the start. The idea of a wolf and a…well…"

"Rat?" Sevika said sharply.

"…yes…plotting *together*? Cooking up a plan together, mutually trusting one another, and earning that trust in return? Doesn't exist in her cosmology."

"*Didn't* exist," Sevika muttered.

Mel flinched. "Oh. Yes." *Did I just forget?*

That I...

Sevika brushed her fingers over her arm. They sat in silence for a moment.

Sevika sighed. "I still gotta apologise to Ekko for lying to him about our little mission. Then slap him upside the head. Kid's too trusting, shouldn't've listened to me."

"I'm sure he'll forgive you, given the outcome. Besides, he might be too busy with all his new *nation-building* to care."

"We all will be." Sevika frowned at her. "You too. Remaking Noxus from the ground up, princess."

"Queen, I suppose," Mel said. Once again, she felt only hollow.

"Whatever you'd like me to call you, I will."

"Thank you," she said softly. "You're an excellent co-conspirator, Sevika."

She nudged her arm with a sly grin. "Don't mention it. You

know you'd be lost without me."

Mel felt her chest go tight.

Ask her, Mel.

She drew in a trembling breath. "I mean…I don't have to be…without you?"

Sevika turned towards Mel, eyes sharp. "What do you mean, princess?"

"I can't exactly trust Rictus, even though the customs of Noxus demand that his allegiance convert to the new ruler, no matter the circumstances." She snorted. "It would hardly be the first time in Noxian history that our new general killed the old. Not even the first rather matricidal child. Though…hopefully the last." Her chest felt tight, nervous. "I have Elora, of course, but her skills lie in politics. I'll need a right hand I can turn to, to fight, if I'm to survive my own people."

Sevika was quiet for a long moment. "I…thank you, Mel."

She cocked her head. "Thank you?"

"That's a big thing to ask."

"And that isn't a yes."

Sevika gave a long sigh. "It's not." She looked across at Vi. "I think my own people need me too much."

Mel looked down, swallowing disappointment.

Sevika's finger brushed her chin, guiding it back up.

"Right now, at least."

"Right now?"

Sevika's eyes were a silvery grey in the cold morning. "Yeah. Right now. And now that we know those gates can transport people safely…I could come visit?"

Mel smiled, just a little. "You could, yes."

Sevika leaned in, brushing a light kiss over her lips. "I would, Mel. And you should ask me again, one day."

Mel nodded. She pushed down a prick of loneliness.

Onwards, Mel. Like always.

Sevika cocked an eyebrow. "Besides, maybe there's all these hot, muscled-up Noxians just waiting for me. Not enough women appreciate flirting via fistfighting these days."

"There really are," Mel admitted, a smile spreading over her face. "You'd fit right into some of the dating customs. You will be batting them away."

"More like *you're* gonna be, trying to keep me all for yourself." Sevika leaned in again. "Unless you'd like to watch." This kiss was longer, sweeter, her tongue dipping into her mouth—

"I'm not leaving for a few more days," Mel murmured against her.

"Is that so?"

* * *

The peaceful night sky stretched above her, and Zaun's bustling markets sprawled out below. Mel shifted her weight on her toes, feeling the slender bridge sway. She'd found it nerve-wracking all those months ago when Jayce first brought her here, but tonight it was oddly comforting. A steady Zaunite bridge just made no sense.

Several days had passed since the impromptu peace summit at Piltover harbour. There had been plenty to keep her busy in the aftermath. There were dozens of new ships to get acquainted to, and hundreds of soldiers, all showing varying degrees of loyalty and hostility towards her. Zaun was organising itself on many fronts; clearing up the bridges, defending itself in

the long-term, figuring out this *"governance crap"* as Sevika so delicately put it – Mel smiled to herself. She'd spent the last few nights with the generous mercenary, though had bade her farewell at the Last Drop just earlier.

So much to do, so little time to think before she began her journey back…home. Being so busy had been a blessing, really.

But tonight, she'd slipped away.

Mel looked down into the crowd and just watched for a time. She let her mind finally drift. Zaun had been explosively festive since the announcement of their sovereignty. Literally – Jinx and many of her friends had taken to setting off fireworks and small blasts of bright smoke around the Lanes whenever they pleased. It always drew laughter and cheers from whoever passed by. Mel shook her head with a smile. She was going to miss that in the cold, stone halls of Noxus.

The markets were here to stay, it had been decided. All Zaun would be fed, no matter what. She watched as teenagers joked around with each other, and a couple embraced. A fight broke out, but the two were laughing as they wrestled. A father slapped his daughter's hand as she reached for something. Mel watched closely, but couldn't tell why.

She watched a mother crouch in front of her young child, explaining something with a serious look on her face.

Mel felt some twist inside her.

Oh.

The child dissolved into tears, and the mother gathered them up in a gentle embrace.

The knot twisted tighter. *Oh, no.*

The cold railing cut into her hands as she clung tight. She kept watching. A woman carried her child on her shoulders as they giggled wildly. An old lady fondly pressed a gift into the

hands of the young man with her. He took it with a roll of his eyes and a smile. Again and again, she saw *love*. And here she was, floating above it. Untouchable. As always.

As her mother was to her.

Her breath began to rasp in her chest—

"Mel?"

She whipped around.

And there was Jayce. He wore a long, soft-looking grey vest, open, the skin of his torso bare despite the night's chill. His eyes were wide and gentle. He kept a few paces away.

"Are you alright?"

"Hello, Jayce." Her voice wobbled. *Weak.*

He took a few cautious steps forwards. "Mel—"

"How did you find me?"

"A hunch." His beard shifted as he smiled.

She gazed out into the market, trying desperately to hold back her tremble. But the sight of a child and mother embracing set her off again.

"Do you want…to be alone?"

His voice tugged on her like a fish in a trap.

"I don't…"

She always kept up her walls. Keeping people out. Keeping safe. *As my mother taught me.*

"No," she breathed. He smelt of forge smoke and cinnamon. Mel hovered, keeping a few inches between them.

"I'm glad I found you," he said quietly. "I saw this in the market. I thought you might like it. Help you remember…us…on your journey."

Jayce pulled a small jar from a bag strapped to his hip, tilting it towards her. The soft glow of the stars and the market lights shone through the candied slices of fruit, floating in syrup. She

took it delicately.

"Is it…"

"Ionian citrus," he said, a twinkle in his eye.

Mel tried to remember the last gift her mother had gotten her that wasn't some kind of weapon. She found she couldn't. *I don't think she even knew my favourite anything.* Thoughts she had been dancing away from for days shoved themselves to the front of her mind.

She sobbed and stumbled forwards. Jayce's warm hands caught her waist, and he gathered her up. Mel let herself sag into the tall, solid weight of him.

"Oh Mel…" He cradled her, for gods knows how long. Mel knew she hadn't quite fallen apart like this in…a long time. She curled her arms into her chest, clutching the little jar.

She pressed her face into his soft vest, trying to ignore the guilt pooling in her gut. "Gods, I'm sorry Jayce, I've made a right mess—"

"Hush." One hand smoothed down her back, following her spine over her dress. A shudder followed in its wake, more of his wonderful warmth seeping into her.

"I don't know what's gotten into me."

"Well, you've had an incredibly normal few days. Mundane, by anyone's standards." She could hear his smile.

She snorted against his bare chest. "Oh yes, just some light matrici—" The word, said so cavalier just days ago, got stuck in her throat. She shuddered again. Jayce squeezed a little tighter.

They stood in silence for a time. Jayce's hand stroked a long path down her back, again and again. She nestled her head under his chin, looking out into the stars. The desperate tears inside her settled. Mel breathed deep, drawing in his sweet, spicy musk.

"Jayce," she said weakly. "You know I have to leave, don't you? Even if there's plenty of things about Zaun that I will miss very much."

"I know," he said softly. One hand drifted to cup her cheek. "Don't worry about that."

She let her breath ghost over the bare skin of his torso. Mel smiled as she felt him shiver.

"I mean, I worry a little. This is my last night here before I sail for Noxus." She traced her fingertips over his chest.

"Is it?" he said, breath catching a little.

"Yes." She pulled back to meet his gaze, and help the jar up to the light. "You know, these are the same colour as your eyes?"

Mel saw the hint of a blush above his beard. "Are—are they?" Desire flared in those warm eyes, though he made no move.

Waiting for me.

Well, that won't do.

"Jayce, did you know I've wanted this for quite a while?" She smoothed a hand up to his neck, feeling his hands tremble on her waist.

"*Mel,*" he sighed.

She pressed her mouth to his, swallowing his gasp with a smile.

* * *

Jayce gave a small, sleepy whimper as she snuggled closer to him, the bed creaking below her.

His bedroom lightened slowly around them as the day began. There was plenty of clutter in the small space, spare parts and

dirty mugs and some of Viktor's jewellery. It made the room cosy. *Well-loved.*

Mel had only slept for an hour or two, though she wasn't tired. Her mind was blissfully empty of thoughts of politics, murder, and her cold, empty childhood. Just Jayce's smell, and memories of his mouth…

She stroked her fingers through his long hair. Jayce gave a deep sigh, and rolled into her. His face was still slack with sleep as his arm wrapped around her and pulled their bodies flush. She chuckled, and dropped a kiss onto his hair. Mel's eyes fluttered closed, and she drifted back into a half-sleep.

* * *

"…you might want to get up, *lásko*— ah!"

The snap of the bedroom door closing echoed in Mel's dream. She stretched against Jayce's body.

"Jayce…"

"Mmm. At'll be Viktor." He kissed her chest sleepily. "Didn't think he was coming by this morning."

"Is it…a problem?" she mumbled.

Jayce snorted. "Usually I'm the one running into an extra visitor or two in our bedroom." He blinked, eyes beginning to focus. "Is it a problem for you? I can ask him for a bit of privacy."

"Not at all." She stroked his cheek fondly. "Although, are we not keeping him out of his own bed? He does live here, yes?"

"He— he's just staying at the tree for a bit. Helping Ekko with a…project." His attempt to lie was even more transparent that

usual, half-asleep as he was. Mel hoped she hadn't stepped into anything difficult.

"I see. Well, it seems rude to keep him out, then." She pressed a hand over Jayce's ear. "Good morning, Viktor!" she called out. Jayce groaned in protest.

She heard a loud snort through the door. "Why hello, Mel. Would you like tea?"

"Oh, yes please."

"I don't think you'll like the tea," Jayce murmured to her.

"I stomached your *raw fish*, Jayce, I think I can handle some tea." She leaned in for a teasing kiss.

A few minutes later, Viktor opened the door clumsily, holding three mugs. Mel and Jayce stilled their languid kisses and wandering hands.

"Nice to see you, my dear. I do hope this means that Jayce pines about you a little less." He gave her a sly smile.

"It's good to see you too, Viktor," she said with genuine warmth. "Pining, has he?"

"I might pine more while you're away," Jayce mumbled, pressing one last sleepy kiss to her neck before rolling over to face his partner.

"Well, you are so adorable when you do so, my dear." Viktor sat delicately on the edge of the bed, offering the mugs. He wore a loose, wide-neck sweater, one shoulder slipping off to pool at the elbow. The silky dress underneath was a searing red, lighter and more colourful than the clothes Mel usually saw him wearing. She was so used to seeing his brows furrowed in pain, or rage, or fear. But they were smooth now, his face far lighter for it.

She accepted her tea and took a small sip. Its acrid, bitter taste curled on her tongue, and she struggled not to grimace.

Jayce noticed anyway, and hid a smile in his mug.

"Thank you, Viktor," she said. "I do apologise for intruding in your home."

"Nonsense. I'm glad Jayce has someone to octopus-cuddle instead of an empty bed while I'm away." Guilt flashed in his eyes.

"It's not too bad, *querida.* I only miss you a bit." Jayce's finger reached out and skimmed along his thigh, over the silk. Curiosity burned inside her, but Mel stayed quiet.

Viktor caught Jayce's hand and brought it to his mouth for a gentle kiss. He examined Mel, his gaze sharp, deliberating. Then she watched his guard fall.

"The time at the tree is helping, thankfully. The itch for Shimmer is fading." She saw the tremble in his fingers, the only sign of his fear. Jayce glanced at her, a little embarrassed as she caught him in his lie. Mel just smiled.

"I'm very glad," she said gently. "It's clearly a wonderful community."

Viktor gave her a relieved look.

"Are you going back there later?" Jayce said.

"Yes, and I think you're coming with me, my love," he said. "I hate to remind you, but Ekko was asking after you when I left the tree this morning. He has a list of tasks for you as long as his arm."

Jayce rolled over, pressing his face into the mattress with a groan. "Can't. Don't want to."

"Vi also mentioned on my way out that you volunteered to run some fighting thing—"

"Ay, *querida*," he protested.

Viktor rolled his eyes at Mel. "This one likes biting off more than he can chew. I am forbidden from saying *I told you so* when

he regrets how much he's committed to. And I think I adhere to that amazingly well, don't I, *lásko*?"

"You do." Deep care shone in his eyes as he turned to look up at his partner. Something ached inside Mel. Not jealousy, just…want. "But…this'll make you really have to resist saying it."

"Mmm?" Viktor quirked an eyebrow.

He looked up at them both, a nervous look twisting in his eyes. "I'm going to tell Vi I'm not helping with fight club. Or… fighting."

"You are?" Mel smoothed a hand over his hair.

"I'm glad that I stepped up, for Zaun. But…" He laced his fingers with Viktor's. "…we can do more with Hextech. There's so many kids out there who want to learn, and Ekko's got such dreams."

"I think that's wonderful, Jayce," Viktor murmured. His eyes met Mel's. Their conversation from weeks ago drifted back to her, and she felt that deep tug of *understanding* between them again.

"*Not killing* does not mean weakness," she echoed him. "To meet the wolf, to know it, and to walk away…is admirable indeed."

Viktor's smile was no longer the small, twisted thing as Mel had seen before. Now it lit up his whole face, breathtakingly beautiful. "Yes. Zaun has other wolves. You, my dear—" he kissed Jayce's hand— "can do other things, if you like."

"Thank you," Jayce sighed. He gave Viktor a mischievous look. "See, I listen to you sometimes."

"If I say *I told you so* in Zaunite, maybe it doesn't count, hmm?"

Mel snorted, but something constricted around her chest. The warmth in their eyes as they gazed at each other, teasing

so lightly but with such respect underneath…

They both glanced at her.

"Sorry, Mel, don't want to leave you out." Jayce rolled into her, nosing at her stomach.

Viktor just watched her closely, piercing. Mel had to look away. She took in the room around her, and the shared clutter of their partnership. The truth crawled up her throat. She considered swallowing it.

"No, not at all. I was just thinking about…" She closed her eyes. "How nice it would be for someone to know me well enough to say *I told you so* like that."

Jayce's arms wrapped tightly around her. "Ah," Viktor said softly.

"It's alright," she said with a small smile. "I'm used to this solitude. I have Elora. It's just…pleasant to…"

"Tourist something else?" The softness in Viktor's eyes took the bite out of his words.

"Yes."

"You know with the Gates, you can come…tourist with us anytime?" Jayce mumbled into her belly. Viktor gave a small nod.

Something pricked at her eyes. "Thank you. I…I may." Jayce gave her a look so open and warm that she had to lean down to kiss him.

"Well…*anytime* might be difficult to promise," Viktor muttered. "There's a couple other visitors to consider."

"I see," Mel said, grinning into Jayce's lips. "There's a rotation to be added to, is there?"

"That's barely a joke," Jayce whispered back.

"Well, perhaps I have my *own* rotation, boys." She threw Viktor a sly look, and he smiled back at her.

"I think the two of us could take on Sevika in a battle for your affections. Right, Jayce?"

"Not a chance, *queridi.*"

Mel dissolved into laughter, and something deep loosened in her chest as they joined her.

31

Viktor

Viktor, Jayce, and Mel wandered the Lanes, making their way slowly to the Firelight tree. None of them wanted to hurry the morning along, and so they distracted themselves from Mel's impending departure with quiet chatter and convenient detours. They ducked into Benzo's, and Viktor haggled so spiritedly that Jayce had to pull him out of the shop with a muttered apology. Mel exited a moment later, holding the very device Viktor had been arguing over.

"Mel, you didn't have to do that!" Jayce gasped.

"How much?" Viktor said sharply.

"Twice the starting price."

He shuddered. "You *really* didn't have to do that." He plucked it from her hands, stowing it away happily.

"I will hardly notice the difference in my coins. Besides, I like Benzo."

"Well, now he very much likes you." She shot him an amused

look.

I will miss her.

They were almost to the tree when Jayce spotted it. He frowned as he looked up though the dim buildings.

"Is that what I think it is?"

Something glimmered in the smog high above the Lanes, like a distant star.

"*Blbec,*" Viktor bit out. His mechanical brace glowed blue as he strode forward, Mel and Jayce hurrying after him. "Come on. I know where they will be."

* * *

They burst out onto Sol Alley, the main thoroughfare of the Undercity.

Jinx stood in the middle of the street, Ekko hovering beside her. Dozens of Firelights floated in the air above them, two or three to a board. The narrow Lanesway buildings were a little wider apart here, and plenty of Zaunites streamed past, enjoying their mid-morning. A curious crowd was starting to gather.

They surrounded a giant, shining disc, the size of a small building. It floated over the city, already a dozen storeys up. Small gemstones flashed around the edge, glowing through the smoke. Viktor frowned as he recognised some of the people seated on the boards – his and Jayce's own apprentices, with Hextech controllers in their hands. They were meant to be at the tree today, running tests on…well, on the very mirror currently suspended over their heads.

Jinx crouched and dragged chalk across the ground, muttering to herself. Isha dashed around her with a protractor and a wild grin on her face. Drawings and calculations sprawled out on the stones around them, papers long forgotten.

"To the left…" she muttered, looking up at Ekko. "Left! One-point-eight meters!"

He nodded and swooped away, up and up to the crews stationed around the giant structure.

"TO THE LEFT!" he yelled. Each Firelight waved back. The Hextech controllers in their hands glowed brighter. With a worrying groan, the disc slowly repositioned itself. The Firelights – and the gathering crowd – yelled out in encouragement. Viktor cocked his head, calculations racing through his head as he judged distances and angles.

"Jinx!" he yelled. Jinx twitched, looking around.

"Oh, hey, V," she said, grinning like she'd just popped by the lab for a chat. "Glad you lot could make it."

"I thought we agreed to wait a few weeks to try out the mirror here?" he hissed. "We need to run more tests down in the sumps. If it fails, and falls…"

"It won't!" She tossed her braids back. Isha imitated her, pouting up at him.

"Jinx, we should be careful with this…" Jayce said.

"I've run the numbers like, twice, and we already ran a test in the sumps a while ago!"

"*One* test, and it—"

"Guys, come *on,* we're *free*!" She bounced on her toes, her aerodynamic boots lifting her off the ground. "No Piltover with some permit nonsense. No blue-belly patrols to shut us down. It's going to go just fine! *EKKO!"*

He zoomed back down to her.

"Plant duty! I'll herd the dumb-dumbs. Let's do this!"

"Yes, ma'am," he said, giving her a sweet smile. Viktor finally noticed the long planter boxes in the centre of the street. Small, sprouting leaves poked out of the soil.

"Oh, wow," he breathed. "Are you finally…?"

"Yeah, dude!" Ekko whooped. The crowd of Zaunites around them was growing steadily, looking up, chattering excitedly.

"Crazy kids," Jayce muttered to him. Bright, wild glee flashed in his eyes.

"Reckless little…" Viktor cursed in Zaunite.

"And here do you think they learned that from, hmm? How many explosions have I had to fish you out of?"

"Hush, *lásko.*" Viktor elbowed him. "Do you think this is wise?"

Jayce looked up, eyes darting over the mirror, the nearest houses, the distances required. That wonderful mind whirred.

Finally, he shrugged. "One way to find out."

Viktor couldn't stop his grin. "Show me," he called to Ekko. They hurried over to the plants.

"Jawline, help me out!" Jinx yelled, springing lightly into the air, Isha on her back. Jayce shot Mel an apologetic look as he walked away. She just smiled back, clearly content to watch the show unfurl. He headed over to Jinx's chalk calculations with a frown.

Jayce and Jinx began to call back and forth as he combed over the numbers. Jinx relayed the instructions steadily to the crews of Firelights. The mirror shifted in the sky, rising slowly. Viktor and Ekko watched in awe as it ascended through the layers of sump-fumes that cloaked the fissures.

It rose further, coaxed on by the Firelights' gentle adjustments. It reached the edge of the shadow of Piltover.

And breached beyond.

It caught the bright sun of mid-morning, and a shaft of light suddenly struck the Lanes. The crowd gasped as the warm spotlight illuminated the cobblestones, several meters across.

Brighter than any light has hit this street before. The Lanes are about to be changed forever.

"Vents!" Viktor cried out. He knew the mirror's design well. Ekko, Jinx, Jayce, and himself had all worked on it on and off since that day, years ago now. The day with the boy, the first crystal, and their promise to him.

Acceleration.

Jinx grinned at him as she swooped past. "See, isn't this fun, V? *VENTS*!"

At the press of a button, the shaft of light began to dim. Though too far away to see, small changes would be rippling through the surface of the mirror, dimming its reflected light from *blistering* to *soothingly warm.*

Viktor walked tentatively towards the puddle of light.

"Go on, V," Ekko said quietly.

"No, I…you should." But he couldn't look away. He always found the feeling of the sun intoxicating at the Firelight tree.

They had harnessed the very sun, and brought it to Zaun. Finally, *truly,* their city.

A miracle.

"Show us, *amor*," Jayce called out. Viktor couldn't turn away.

He stepped into the sunlight. He trailed delicate fingers through its golden rays. Viktor shook his leg free of his skirt, and let the light fall on the bare skin between the brace's struts. The feeling of true warmth on his flesh brought a trembling smile to his face.

"The, ah…the mirror conveys the ultraviolet radiation well,

we will need to establish the proper intensity to avoid burning any— ooft!"

Ekko crashed into him, wrapping him up in an all-consuming embrace. Viktor just pressed a hand against Ekko's back.

"You did it," Viktor murmured. "You should be very, very proud of yourself, Ekko." *You've pushed yourself so hard for so long, poor boy.* He felt Ekko's shoulders shudder with silent tears.

"It's cus of you, V," he murmured.

"Plant time!" Jinx yelled out more instructions, guided by Jayce's calculations.

The spotlight of sun began to move, slowly, slowly. Jinx was, indeed, being cautious. *Even if the entire endeavour should have waited another month to make sure they didn't drop the giant thing on any Zaunite heads.*

Viktor shook his head, smiling to himself. *You're getting old, Viktor.* That wasn't something he thought he'd ever worry about. But with the support of the Firelights, regular food, far less Shimmer, and now sunlight…that warmth on his skin…

Hope welled in his chest..

The sunlight shifted towards the gardenbed and its little plants. A few Firelights and other Zaunites clustered close, the ones who liked to help out at the tree. They nurtured the tree cuttings, and any other limited herbological projects they could get to survive down here. The same hope shined in their eyes.

Ekko broke away, wiping his face clean hurriedly. He turned to look as the light fell on the plants.

The leaves glowed a bright, fragile green. Viktor gasped as they shivered a little, stretching out their fronds infinitesimally.

"More light, I think. Jayce!" Viktor called out.

"Yes, V?"

"More light!"

"MORE LIGHT!" he bellowed to Jinx, who took up the call. The vents shifted and adjusted, and the light falling on the precious saplings intensified a little. *Not enough to burn them.*

"Good!" Viktor called out, watching closely. He could see small, green buds on their stems. Ekko rushed to the little plants, examining every detail. There was a small device in his hands to take readings, but it sat forgotten.

"Oh, come on…" Ekko breathed.

A moment passed. Zaun watched with baited breath. Then a few small buds shivered. Lurid purple petals unfurled, beginning to bloom, waving with a life of their own.

Ekko blinked back more tears. "They spoke of these plants in the old stories. Sevika told me. But there hasn't been enough light for them to bloom down here for…centuries, I think? I didn't want to hope that today…"

Viktor pressed a hand to his shoulder. "Incredible, Ekko. And the air?"

Ekko peered at his device. "Too early to tell. But once they grow more, they should start filtering out air-borne toxins. I want to make floating planter boxes next, they could catch the sun easily with a bit of clever positioning, aligned with the movements of the sun throughout the day, and more mirrors of course…" He chattered for a while, going over the plans and ideas that Viktor had already heard many times before.

The Zaunites around them began to creep closer to the plants. They reached out their hands gleefully into the patch of sun. Jinx zoomed above, yelling out orders to establish a net of gemstones, meant to anchor the mirror permanently in place.

A group of children clustered by the boxes, giggling as they

reached into the reflected sunlight. Jayce walked across. His hand brushed over Viktor's waist as he passed, then he crouched down beside them. They peppered him with questions about *how the shiny thing up there works,* and *how did this flower grow,* and *how do those cool hoveryboards fly,* and—

Jayce answered each child slowly and in turn, with a patience Viktor could never quite find for minds as young as theirs. He preferred working with Ekko and Jinx's exuberance. But he watched fondly. Suddenly, he remembered a small boat in a stream, and a lonely Zaunite boy whose inquisitive mind was never cherished.

Viktor watched the man he loved shower the children with care and praise, having helped literally put the sun in the sky over Zaun. Ekko touched the small leaves tenderly, and he heard Jinx cackle, without that raw edge she had in the middle of battle.

He felt a grateful tear roll down his cheek.

32

Jinx

Jinx burst through the doors of the Last Drop. She danced through the crowd.

"GERT! Your finest juice, if you please!"

Jinx snagged a few empty glasses from tables as she passed. The crowd at the Last Drop was especially rowdy tonight. A few burly miner men knocked into her, and she knocked right back. *Grotty sump-rats,* she thought affectionately. The tight-laced cleanliness of Piltover always made her skin crawl when she ventured topside. Give her a big old crew of stubborn, swearing, spitting trencher trash any day.

Gert rolled her eyes at her, busy with other customers. "Sure. Some of our *one juice,* coming up."

Jinx dumped the glasses on the bartop, within arm's reach. Yeah, the shoving, dirty humanity of the Last Drop never failed to make her feel alive. *At home.*

The thought made her flinch. The moment you felt safe, that's

when they'd get you. Who? Who knows. Who cares. Just don't trust good things, no way, not ever.

She shoved down the old instinct.

No. Things are different now. I'm gonna make 'em different.

Gert slid her juice across the counter. She paused as she saw the dirty glasses, a look of tender surprise on her face.

"Hey, thanks, Jinx."

Jinx squirmed. "You're damn welcome. Be lost without me. Making trees grow out of nothing, now cleaning up dirty beer mugs. Angel of Zaun, I am!"

Gert just smiled, brushing past Jinx's stab at humour. "Y'know, it's been pretty awesome."

"What, me?" She twirled the end of her braid.

"Yeah, you." Gert cocked an eyebrow. "These days anyway. Watching you go from a little snot monster into someone… alright, actually."

Goddamn Gert's getting sentimental? Maybe Ekko's cool flowers are putting something out into the air.

A snarky reply came to her lips, then she sighed.

"Thanks, buddy. You, too."

Gert almost dropped a glass. "I might even like you if you keep that up."

"Oh, don't worry, this is never happening again, Gertie. You just caught me in a good mood!" Jinx spied Vi sitting in a booth in the corner and slid off her stool.

Gert's glower slammed back in place. "Call me that again and I'll rip those braids out of your head."

"Gotta catch me first!" Jinx zapped across the room before Gert could reply, blowing her a kiss as she slid in beside her sister.

Vi was staring into her beer as if it held the secrets to the

universe. She'd left her stiff, shoulder-y jacket at home tonight, instead wearing just a soft flannel shirt. Since everything that happened at the bunker, she wasn't as angry at everything. Just…tired, now.

"Heya, sis," she said, nudging her. "If the beer starts talking back to you, it's time to call it a night."

She just snorted, taking a drink.

"Seen Ekko's new trees yet?" Jinx asked.

Vi sighed. "Didn't have time today. Too busy today organising patrols for the bridge clean-up, plus we probably need the Firelights to—"

"Hey look, Lest is singing tonight!" The dusty old piano in the corner had been brushed off, and Lest was crooning something soothing into a microphone. Jinx winked at Vi.

Vi rolled her eyes, but went with the topic change. "You'll never guess who's getting up there with her."

Jinx leapt up onto the booth to get a better look. She gasped as she spotted Viktor slinking his way through the crowd. He wore an absolutely stunning dress. Laid on top of black velvet, thin tubes of Shimmer wended their way over the fabric. The glowing purple curls following his figure. One gemstone nestled snugly at the hollow of his throat, lighting his face from beneath. The Last Drop rumbled with cheers as he stepped up to the microphone. He shook his long curls out of his face with the grace of a regent.

"Shall we, darling?" he said lightly to Lest, who gave him the most cat-like smile Jinx had ever seen from her.

Jayce sat front and centre, as close to Viktor as he could get without being literally in the spotlight. Viktor gazed at him through his lashes. Jinx just laughed as the two beautiful Zaunites began to sing, soft and low.

I put a spell on you
Because you're mine
You better stop the things you do
I tell you, I ain't lying
I ain't lying

A woman sat beside Jayce, with greying hair pulled into a neat, low bun. Jinx knew she was a Piltie the second she saw her, but she held Jayce's hand gently.

Mamá made her way down to the trenches, I guess. Good for him.

Jinx gave a nice, loud, scream, giggling when Viktor searched the crowd for her. He gave her a tiny eyeroll as he kept singing.

She and Vi sipped their drinks for a moment, just soaking in the Last Drop, full, loud, and happy.

"You busy fighting Piltover tomorrow, or do you got a minute?" Jinx asked.

"I have time. What's up?"

"I got some plots to run by you. Schemes, even! Just thinking about what Piltover might do next, how to nip those blue-butts in the bud."

Vi blinked. "Schemes…to run by me?"

"Yeah. Nothing city-destroying. Or sneakily kind-of inspiring a pretty Piltie into mother-killing." Jinx snorted.

"I mean, that's not exactly— it was kind of a lucky guess. Easily could've backfired…"

"It wasn't, and you know it." Jinx elbowed her. "If you make me say "you were right, Vi' I'm gonna puke on you."

Vi nudged her back. "Been a while since you did that to me. Last time, it was candy-blue."

"And it would be this time." She stuck her tongue out at her. It felt strange, to just bicker with her sister. The weight of constant, impending *battle* still pressed on them. But tonight,

the roof of the Last Drop held it back.

Vi toyed with her glass for a moment. "But— yeah, sounds good, sis. Let's talk about it sometime. Though, there was something else I was thinking, maybe for tomorrow."

"Mm?"

"Wanna go cave-hopping together?"

Jinx smiled, wistful. "Damn, I must've been ten years old last time we went down there."

"Long time," Vi said softly.

"What the heck are we gonna get up to in the old caves?"

Vi shrugged. "Same shit. Poke at sump-frogs. Freak you out with ghost stories about Janna. See who can climb highest."

"I mean, I got a real advantage these days." Jinx let her eyes glow with Shimmer. Vi's fingers tensed around her glass for a moment, then relaxed. Jinx remembered what Vi was like when she first got out of Stillwater, hoping to find Powder, and meeting Jinx instead. Those flashes of Shimmer always made her flinch, and grief would show in her eyes. But now it was just a flicker. Vi held it back well.

Or maybe she grieved less these days.

"We could bring Isha?" Jinx said quietly.

"That would be nice. Definitely one day. But…" Vi shrugged, trying and failing for nonchalance. "Just us tomorrow?"

"Yeah, Vi. Let's do it."

The smile her sister gave her made her stomach curl. In a good way? Maybe. She drank her juice instead of trying to figure it out.

Vi glanced up. Jinx turned to see Silco lounging at the bar, watching them idly.

Vi looked at her for a long moment. Jinx didn't know what she saw. But whatever it was, she looked again at the tall man,

and waved him over.

"You let him back into the Last Drop, then?" Jinx muttered.

"'Course I did. There'd be no Zaun without him."

"Hello, my dears." Silco slid into the booth opposite them. He was so good at wielding lethal grace to impress and intimidate everyone. But it was missing tonight, perhaps stowed carefully away. Jinx grinned, happy to see him, the *him* that he only used to show to her.

"D'you see my trees!" she said, bouncing in her seat.

"I did, Jinx," he said, his voice warm and rich. "They are marvellous."

"I *know*."

Vi chuckled. She was watching Silco carefully, sizing him up. "What you got there?" she said, nodding to his stout glass.

Silco gave a nostalgic smile. "Gert was gracious enough to finally pull together one of my favourites. Noxian whiskey, a dash of chemjuice, and one shimmerbug." The bug floated in the glass. "Two if…someone else dares you."

Jinx and Vi glanced at each other, and said nothing.

"Vander thought it up on our very first night here. No furniture, no bar, no nothing. Just a dusty room and…him."

Silco stared at one sister, then the other. "Look at you both," he breathed. "If only he could see Zaun now. He would be very, very proud of you."

Jinx squirmed in the booth. "He'd be pretty proud of you, too, y'know," she muttered.

Silco just blinked at her, his mismatched eyes watery.

Vi's voice was soft, so soft Jinx almost didn't hear her. "What was it – he – like back then?"

He gave her a small, sweet smile.

Something deep in Jinx whispered.

Family. Home. Love.
Her mind began to spew out its usual bullshit.
Don't trust it. Gonna jinx it. It's gonna fall apart because you—
She shoved it down firmly as Silco began to tell them stories.
No.
No more.
Gonna build something new.